

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE MYSTERY OF THE
CHRISTMAS EVE CAPER





in

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OF THE
CHRISTMAS EVE CAPER**

Christmas is just around the corner. Jupiter, Pete and Bob attend GameFame, a nationally famous toy convention, where a great series of action figures is to be unveiled—the *Heroes of the Universe*! However, the day before the Christmas Eve gala, a prominent journalist falls unconscious in his office room. He is supposed to deliver the keynote address at the gala, so is this an attempt to disrupt the launch of the new toys? Together with the security chief Mr Nostigon, The Three Investigators have only 24 hours to solve the mystery.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Christmas Eve Caper

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23rd December, noon.

“Wow!” Pete exclaimed. “A real Christmas paradise!”

Astonished, he let his gaze wander through the enormous hall, which was adorned from floor to ceiling with Christmas decorations, fir greenery and countless toys. A cheerful, if somewhat adventurous, melodic mix of *Jingle Bells*, *The First Noël* and *Joy to the World* lay over the colourful hustle and bustle in the countless aisles.

Bob nodded in agreement. “This is exactly how I imagined Santa Claus’s home at the North Pole when I was a little boy... well—maybe without all the salespeople.”

“That’s just the way it is at a trade show,” replied the equally visibly impressed First Investigator. “And in this case, it’s actually the largest toy trade show this side of the Rocky Mountains. It’s where the entire industry meets every Christmas to exchange ideas about the latest developments and trends in the coming year—away from the curious public, of course.”

Pete turned his head to a huge window, behind which a magnificent mountain landscape stretched out against a steel-blue sky. The deeply snow-covered, lightly wooded hills glistened picturesquely in the sunlight, adding to the impression of a postcard idyll. A good distance away from the shielded fairgrounds, countless holidaymakers were making their rounds like colourful ants, gliding down the perfectly groomed slopes on skis or snowboards.

“A state-of-the-art exhibition centre in the middle of one of the most beautiful winter sports areas in the country—the ideal combination for a Christmas toy fair,” noted the Second Investigator.

“Glad you’re enjoying GameFame,” a man with a friendly smile spoke up. He had slightly greying brown hair and his elegant suit was slightly taut at the waist.

“You bet we do, Mr Nostigon,” Jupiter agreed, his eyes shining. “Your invitation is like an early Christmas present!”

Mr Nostigon was formerly the chief of police at Fishingport, a village on the East Coast. The Three Investigators had known him since their adventure on Skeleton Island. Back then, the boys had accompanied Pete’s father to a movie shoot there and had solved a mystery assisted by Mr Nostigon.

Some time ago, however, Mr Nostigon had retired from the police force and moved to the West Coast for family reasons. Near San Francisco, he had set up his own business as a freelance security consultant and had landed some initial jobs in the movie industry through Mr Crenshaw. Thus Nostigon had been able to quickly build up a good reputation, and that got him recommended for bigger assignments. For the time being, the culmination of his new job was the role as security chief at GameFame. As in previous years, the big game fair took place in Crystal Pike, a Californian winter sports resort near the famous Mammoth Mountain.

As thanks for Mr Crenshaw’s support, Mr Nostigon had invited Pete, Jupiter and Bob to the famous Christmas fair after consultation with the event management. Of course, The Three Investigators had accepted enthusiastically, especially since they—officially registered as employees of the security team—would also get insights behind the scenes of GameFame.

“This place is really incredible,” Bob remarked. “Look at the sheer size of this hall... You could easily hide an entire cruise ship in here!”

“I’m glad I don’t have to handle the transportation of guests to and from the hotel,” Mr Nostigon replied, amused. “But you’re right, of course—even I was completely blown away by the size of this place at first... and yet this is only one of several sections of the fairgrounds.”

“Seriously?” asked Pete, dumbfounded. “This isn’t even all of it?”

“Not by a long shot. The entire complex comprises three main areas—the Grand Lodge with the hotel area in the east, then the currently unused Convention Centre in the north and the Fairground Hall here in the west. There are also five courtyards with restaurants and cafés and even a dedicated cinema.” Nostigon sighed. “I’m sure you can imagine what a huge amount of work it would take to maintain the security.”

“A mammoth task, no doubt,” Jupiter replied appreciatively. “Am I right in assuming that you have conducted an evaluative feedback with the existing security resources in advance?”

“Sheesh...” whispered Pete, turning to Bob. “If you can say that three times in quick succession, I’ll buy you a truckload of cotton candy.”

Mr Nostigon smirked. “I see your penchant for highfalutin phrases hasn’t changed, Jupiter.”

“If the day ever comes when our friend here expresses himself perfectly intelligibly from the time he gets up until the time he goes to bed, we’ll notify you by e-mail right away,” Bob assured him with a wry grin.

Gruffly, the First Investigator waved it off. “That’s another hopeless exaggeration. You’re acting as if I regularly speak to you in ancient Babylonian!”

“Well, I’m sure the ancient Babylonian people didn’t concern themselves with ‘evaluative feedback’—whatever that is,” Pete muttered softly.

But before the First Investigator could respond to this pointed remark, Mr Nostigon steered the conversation back to the topic at hand. “To answer your question, Jupiter, in terms of security, there were no resources here that I could have drawn upon.”

“You don’t?” asked Bob in surprise, “but GameFame has been held at Crystal Pike for years. There should be a well-rehearsed security team here.”

“True,” Nostigon confirmed, “but unlike past events, this time the show management has turned the whole concept around. All the positions were changed. Even the post of security chief had been re-advertised...”

With an elated presentational gesture, Pete pointed at the security chief. “... And the winner was you.”

“Thanks in no small part to the good jobs your father got me,” Nostigon replied with a smile. “However, because of the change in concept, I’ve had to brief a completely new team here.”

Jupe raised his eyebrows thoughtfully. “Rather unusual, isn’t it? After all, there was an experienced security team here who knew everything down to the last detail.”

“Do you know if there was any particular reason for this change?” Bob enquired.

Nostigon frowned. “I can only assume that. You see, there’s a very special attraction this time. Tomorrow, at noon sharp, there will be—”

“Look out, Bob!” cried Jupiter abruptly, but by then it was too late.

Completely by surprise, two huge paws with sharp claws grabbed Bob by his shoulders and pulled him around. Stunned, his friends stared at the unreal scene. An enormous terrifying figure, covered from top to bottom with rust-brown fur, had crept up behind Bob and was now bending down to his chalk-pale face. There was nothing human about the

creature's head, but it resembled a hideous ape's face, with long fangs protruding from its massive mouth.

"Youuu..." the creature growled in an abysmal voice, "... have... won!"

Puzzled, Jupiter and Pete, who were about to rush to the aid of their threatened colleague, paused.

With a suddenly not-at-all terrifying smile on his fleshy lips, the fur giant now fingered a small blue envelope from under his spiked breastplate and handed it to Bob, who still couldn't get a word out.

"Inside is your personal lucky number for tomorrow's grand raffle," the ape-man blithely continued. "Unique prizes await there, flown in exclusively from my home planet of Neteria! Rest assured, little Earthling..." Theatrically, the colossus jerked his fists upward. "... Gaming fun has a new name: *Heroes of the Universe!*"

At that moment, a glint of realization flared in Pete's eyes. "Now I know who that character is! That's Beastor—the Lord of Monsters!"

"You're right..." Jupiter agreed. Only now did he notice that Mr Nostigon had been waiting in the background all this time. With an amused smile, he now approached them.

"That's right. In the flesh and in full life size at GameFame, together with the other fellow heroes. This is exactly what I was going to tell you when we were interrupted by the 'Monster Tamer'."

In the meantime, the shaggy creature had carefully adjusted its slightly slipped breastplate and turned to leave. Before doing so, however, it bent down once more to Bob. "So don't forget to come to the big Christmas presentation tomorrow..." He grinned with a wink, exposing his full set of predatory teeth. "... Or I'll throw you to my dragons!"

After Beastor had trotted off, Bob, still completely flabbergasted, turned to the others in slow motion. He held the blue envelope away from him with pointed fingers like a poisonous insect. He felt as if he had just woken up from a crazy dream.

"Christmas presentation?" Bob wondered aloud.

"Exactly!" confirmed Mr Nostigon cheerfully. He pointed to the boys' travel bags. "But for now, you should check in. Afterwards, we'll meet again for lunch and I'll tell you all about it."

"An excellent plan, sir," Jupiter replied with a beatific expression. "After that spectacular monster surprise, we could do with a little refreshment..."

23 Hours Left

23rd December, 1 pm.

After The Three Investigators had checked into their rooms on the twelfth floor of the Grand Lodge, they went to Lumberjack's, where Mr Nostigon was already waiting for them. In the rustic lumberjack-style restaurant, which was also decorated for Christmas, they enjoyed a hearty mountain meal.

The security chief pointed apologetically at the display of the mobile phone lying next to his plate. "Please forgive me for having to stay on call during my lunch break. From experience, it's around this time that most glitches happen."

"No problem," Jupiter replied with a smile as he balanced a sumptuous piece of omelette on his fork. "'Always ready' is a motto we are familiar with."

"As investigators, we're actually always on duty," Pete confirmed. "If it were up to Jupe, we'd do away with the nuisance of sleeping too, but—" Puzzled, he paused.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Bob, irritated. "You made a face like you just saw the Grinch."

"Not quite... it's the strongest man in the universe!" Pete inconspicuously pointed to a giant with a blond mane, loincloth and fur boots, whose enormous muscles would have made any professional body-builder green with envy.

"Indeed... that would be Free-Man, the legendary leader of the *Heroes of the Universe*..." replied Bob in a lowered voice.

Jupe smirked. "I didn't know the greatest hero on the planet Neteria had a taste for barbecued ribs."

"Those are just the exclusive secrets you only learn here at GameFame," Mr Nostigon noted mischievously, "which brings us back to the topic at hand." He pushed his empty plate aside and leaned back. "As I'm sure you know, *Heroes of the Universe* was an extraordinarily popular fantasy television series. Thirty years ago, it enjoyed huge success, and because of a nationwide wave of nostalgia, it's now riding high again."

The Second Investigator nodded. "I guess you could say that. Right now, the reruns are running up and down on TV. Those totally wacky outfits and cheap effects seem unintentionally hilarious these days, of course—but kind of cool too."

"A real phenomenon," Bob agreed, glancing over at the muscular warrior again. Despite his imposing physique, the numerous wrinkles on his face failed to hide the fact that he had passed his fiftieth year some time ago. "I didn't even know that the actors from back then were still active. Actually, I thought they had all faded into obscurity after the series ended."

"For the most part, they were," Nostigon confirmed, "but when the big retro wave hit some time ago, the forgotten heroes were suddenly in demand again. Since then, they've been popular guests at movie conventions and fan fairs. We've also invited them as show stoppers during autograph sessions—at least on the surface."

"On the surface?" asked Jupiter.

With a meaningful expression, Mr Nostigon raised his right index finger. "That's right—and that's where GameFame's secret guest of honour comes in..."

He pulled a small brochure out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket and laid it open in the middle of the table so that each of The Three Investigators could take a look at the printed photo. The picture showed the sympathetic face of a smiling man of about twenty-five with nickel glasses, whose untamed brown curls broke the frame of the picture.

“Dwight Fillmore—Computer Scientist, Inventor, Visionary,” Pete read the attached short text, frowning. “Maybe this is another big gap in my education, as I’m afraid this doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“It’s a rare occurrence, but it’s a gap we share,” the First Investigator admitted.

“No need for excessive self-criticism, boys,” Mr Nostigon assured them, pocketing the brochure again. “At present, indeed, Dwight Fillmore is known only in professional circles, but that will certainly change after tomorrow.”

Tensely Bob raised his eyebrows. “This whole thing wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with the mysterious presentation I was so charmingly invited to by the monkey monster?”

“Bull’s-eye!” retorted Nostigon, beaming. “Tomorrow is Dwight’s great hour, or rather the great hour of his creation.”

“Creation?” asked Pete, irritated. “You mean a toy that this Mr Fillmore has created?”

Now it was Mr Nostigon who conspiratorially lowered his voice. There was a mysterious glint in his gaze. “Not just any toy, but a revolutionary new generation of playthings that will eclipse all previous standards.”

“Tell us more!” murmured Jupiter eagerly.

“Here’s the thing—Mr Fillmore, or more accurately Dr Fillmore, is a true prodigy. At only twenty-one years old, he graduated *summa cum laude*, or with the highest honours, with a degree in computer science. His ground-breaking research in the field of so-called smart toys has quickly caught the attention of some of the leading toy companies.”

“Smart toys?” asked Bob.

“Right. Dwight’s focus is on highly mobile action figures that can act completely autonomously thanks to cutting-edge microchip technology and optical sensors.”

“Madness...” Pete gasped. “So these toys are... completely on the loose?”

Nostigon nodded. “They run, jump, climb—and of course, fight with each other when good meets evil. Depending on the strategic alignment, entire competitions can be fought, but of course, there’s also the option to switch to off-mode if you want to play ‘normally’ with these toys.”

“This does indeed sound like a real revolution in the toy world,” the First Investigator observed. “No wonder Mr Fillmore’s researches have caused a sensation in the industry. Anyone who is the first to go to market with such a superior innovation can make the big bucks.”

“That’s right,” the security chief confirmed. “That’s why as long as two years ago, Dwight was approached by Fun Fellows, the California toy company, to develop an entirely new series of action figures.”

“And was it successful?” Bob asked.

“Indeed... and the highlight of it all, thanks to shrewd negotiations, Fun Fellows secured the rights to release these toys in a very special form, namely as perfect miniaturizations of the—”

“*Heroes of the Universe!*” Pete interjected.

Energetically Mr Nostigon waved his hands. “Not so loud—until noon tomorrow, twelve o’clock sharp, this is still top secret.” He smiled broadly and pointed his head at the blond hunk. “That’s when Free-Man, the leader of the heroes, will face off against Skulldor, the skeleton-faced Dark Lord of the Underworld, during an action-packed gala.”

“And then, with pomp and circumstance, the grand presentation of their mini versions,” Jupiter concluded. “A really clever move. You combine a spectacular new toy technology with the design of a nationally extremely popular cult series.”

“Sounds like a perfect recipe for success,” Bob remarked.

“Absolutely,” Nostigon agreed. “Rumour has it that Fun Fellows has invested an almost astronomical sum in the production and marketing of the action figures. Accordingly, expectations are now high that the *Heroes* launch will be a huge hit.”

As if in confirmation, the Free Man actor now rose from his seat and raised a mighty, gleaming silver sword in a heroic gesture. His following exclamation, however, sounded considerably less heroic:

“By the power of the Universe—I want dessert!”

22 Hours Left

23rd December, 2 pm.

Sated and satisfied, Mr Nostigon and The Three Investigators made their way back to Fairground Hall following the hearty meal.

Pete was still revelling in thoughts of the new toy line. “Just fantastic... independent fighting action figures, heroes against monsters! Makes you want to be a little boy again.”

Grinning, Bob dug out his raffle envelope. “If I win one of the *Heroes*, I promise I’ll let you play with it.”

“You’re too kind,” Pete retorted sarcastically.

“Never mind, Pete,” Jupe comforted his friend. “At the sight of these prodigy fighters, many an adult will probably rediscover the child in him. No doubt that’s part of the marketing strategy.”

Although the walk from Lumberjack’s to the exhibition hall was only relatively short, it took them quite a while to cover the distance as there was always something to marvel at, for example, a magnificent Frosty Snowman who juggled six Christmas tree balls in front of his mighty belly with considerable skill. In addition, the two security checks they had to go through also cost quite a bit of time.

“As you can see everywhere here, you can only gain entry with a valid identification chip card,” the security chief explained. “You either have to show it to the security staff or you hold it in front of a reader, as you did just now at the automatic door. In certain secured areas, no one gets in other than the invited trade audience, press, and GameFame staff.”

“No chance for uninvited visitors,” Jupiter noted.

“Not the slightest. After all, GameFame has a reputation to lose as the most exclusive game show in the country.” With a sweeping gesture, Nostigon pointed to the vast, Christmas-glittered hall. “The security system is absolutely seamless. To get here, into the heart of the fair, arriving visitors must pass through a total of four checkpoints. A ninety-eight-strong security team is on permanent standby and the security office on the second floor is manned around the clock. In addition, the entire exhibition area, including the nine access routes, is under camera surveillance.”

“In other words, you’re as safe here as in the lap of the gods,” Bob summed up the explanation.

Pete grinned wryly. “In this case, more in the lap of Santa Claus, I suppose.”

Nostigon smiled as well. “As you know, this is my first job of this magnitude, and of course I want everything—”

Before he could finish the sentence, the mobile phone in his jacket pocket beeped. He quickly pulled out the small device and looked tensely at the display.

“A glitch?” asked Bob.

“That remains to be seen,” Nostigon replied, frowning. “A cleaner in Section D reported an office room that is locked from the inside. According to the layout, it’s the room of Desmond Calbourn—a prominent journalist, but he’s not actually due to arrive until this evening. The cleaner said that no one answered when he knocked on the door, and the

security office ruled out a system malfunction. I'm going to take a look just to be on the safe side."

He pointed to the main aisle, where a portly man in a garish glitter outfit was currently drawing a fir tree in the air with some kind of laser pen at one of the countless booths. "Do you want to come along, or would you rather look around a bit by yourselves?"

Jupiter tapped his ID card attached to his jacket collar. "As official members of the security team, we're here to assist you, right, fellas?"

"Sure thing," Bob agreed. "It's not like the Christmas wonderland is going anywhere."

"Okay, follow me then. It would take us half an eternity to go through the crowd to get to the grand staircase and the lifts, so we'll take a shorter route." Mr Nostigon made his way to a metal door, which he hastily unlocked with a black smart card. One by one, everyone entered the stairwell beyond. The drab, dull grey walls and cold-white fluorescent lights offered an almost unimaginable contrast to the dazzling colours of the exhibition hall.

Mr Nostigon pointed upstairs. "We need to go up to the sixth floor. Along the way, you'll get to go through a 'Level Blue' passage."

Irritated, Bob furrowed his brow. "'Level Blue'?"

"We use this to refer to all areas used internally but closed to the public. In an emergency, these areas can be opened with a single unlock to allow for quick evacuation."

"Good to know..." muttered Pete, who shivered involuntarily at the thought of a stampede.

"Is it... actually normal that the... press representatives have their own... offices?" asked Jupiter, panting. He would have much preferred the detour to the lifts.

"No, Mr Calbourn has a certain special status. He is an absolute industry expert and will be giving the keynote address at the launch of *Heroes* tomorrow. That's why he's been given a personal office space by the event management for background discussions and interviews."

Again, the mobile phone rang, and the security chief paused to read the message.

"News?" asked Bob.

"Yes... According to the records, Mr Calbourn actually arrived here less than an hour ago and received his smart card. He passed the checkpoint outside the corridor in Section D just after two o'clock. Obviously, his plans changed at short notice."

Thoughtfully, Pete frowned. "If he's really in the room—why isn't he answering?"

"Maybe he's taking a midday nap before he jumps into the hustle and bustle of the fair," Nostigon speculated, "or maybe he's on the phone and didn't hear the knock. We'll see what happened in a minute..."

By now they had reached the sixth floor and Mr Nostigon opened another metal door, beyond which was a bright corridor decorated with pine garlands. Some distance away stood a forty-something-year-old slim man in blue overalls with a handcart full of cleaning supplies. He blinked nervously as the four arrivals approached him. The name tag on his shirt identified him as Frederic Barnes of Maintenance Team 3.

"Glad you're here." He turned to Nostigon and pointed to Room D-609. It too had a smart card lock with a small red light glowing in the top bar. "As you can see, the lock has been activated from the inside. Yet according to the schedule, this room isn't supposed to be occupied for another three hours. I knocked, but no one answered... and uh..." Barnes paused, as if he had to weigh his words carefully. "Actually, I heard something in there..."

"What did you hear?" Jupiter gasped, and then realized at the same moment that he wasn't the one leading the investigation. The First Investigator was relieved to see that Mr Nostigon didn't seem to take offence at his impulsive move.

The man in the overalls stroked his pointed chin with a jerky motion. "There was a sound. A sort of... soft giggle."

"A giggle?" A steep crease appeared on the security chief's forehead. "So you heard Mr Calbourn giggle?"

Energetically Barnes shook his head. "That was no man. No way! The voice was far too high for that." He glanced toward the office door with obvious discomfort. "I can't describe it properly, but there was something wrong about that giggle..."

"What do you mean?" asked Pete, whom the chill had caught up with again.

Uncertainly, the cleaner wrung his hands. "Don't think I'm crazy, but there was something... uh... evil about that giggle—something menacing that went right through me. Then, when I knocked, it abruptly stopped."

"Wait a minute," Mr Nostigon took the floor again. His features had hardened abruptly. "So you heard the giggling before you knocked on the door?"

"Right." Hesitantly, Barnes pointed to a mobile phone he wore on his tool belt. "When I was outside that room, I got a text from my wife. Of course, I know we're not supposed to take private messages while we're at work, but it's Claire's birthday, you see. So I quickly texted her back that I would definitely home on time tonight. Meanwhile, I suddenly heard this creepy giggling coming from behind the door."

"But then when you knocked, no one answered you," added Bob.

The cleaner nodded and pointed down the corridor. "Then I went to the checkpoint and reported the matter."

Mr Nostigon had mixed feelings on the matter as he did not want to barge into a potentially embarrassing situation. After all, it was not forbidden for the journalist to receive visitors in his office and to be undisturbed, but even the boys sensed that something was amiss here. Barnes did not give the impression of a busybody who wanted to make himself the centre of attention with some made-up story.

"You were absolutely right to let us know." With firm steps, Nostigon stepped to the door and knocked several times, calling out Mr Calbourn's name. There was no response. Hesitantly, he took out his black smart card again. "My access card can disable the locking mechanism," he explained to the boys. "Given the special circumstances, I'll take responsibility for opening this door."

"Well, now I'm curious..." muttered Pete in an occupied voice.

"Mr Calbourn? This is security. I'm coming in now!" Mr Nostigon called out followed by guiding his card to the reader. A bright beep announced the unlocking process.

Energetically, Nostigon grasped the door handle with one hand. Slowly he opened the door and cautiously entered. The Three Investigators followed him, while Barnes stood uncertainly at the corridor.

Inside the office there was diffuse semi-darkness, all the blinds were lowered. It almost looked as if someone had retired here for a nap, but the leather sofa on the left side of the room was empty.

"Over there!" exclaimed Bob excitedly. "Behind the desk—there's someone on the floor!"

21 Hours Left

23rd December, 3 pm.

“Indeed! It is Calbourn!” Mr Nostigon exclaimed. In the utmost anxiety, he rushed over to the lifeless man of about fifty, lying beside an overturned office chair. With practised grips, Mr Nostigon felt for Calbourn’s pulse.

“Well, is... he okay?” asked Pete haltingly.

“Barely any pulse, no respiration detectable,” the security chief replied hurriedly. “I’m starting CPR. Barnes, alert emergency medical services!”

“Yes, sir!” Stunned, the cleaner responded from the corridor and hurriedly went off.

Immediately Pete was at Nostigon’s side to help him with artificial respiration and cardiopulmonary massage, which fortunately quickly took effect. For a brief moment, Calbourn even regained consciousness, but sank back into unconsciousness after a soft groan. Meanwhile, Jupe and Bob heaved aside a heavy conference table to make room for the rescue team, then pulled up the blinds.

Shortly thereafter, the paramedics arrived. Thanks to the quick first aid, the journalist was by now no longer in danger, but he was still unconscious.

After the men had examined him and carried him off on a stretcher, Mr Nostigon, breathing heavily, wiped the sweat from his forehead. Appreciatively, he patted the Second Investigator on the shoulder. “You did a marvellous job, Pete. The rescue came literally at the very last second.”

“We make a good team,” Pete agreed, panting.

Jupiter nodded and looked over at the pale cleaner standing in the corner of the room, visibly shaken. “It’s fortunate that Mr Barnes reacted so quickly and informed the security office... otherwise, this would have ended badly.”

“I never... expected that,” Barnes muttered, blinking hard as if he still couldn’t believe what had just happened. Then he glanced at Nostigon. “Is there... anything else I can do for you, or—”

“Not at the moment,” the security chief replied. “But please keep yourself available for any questions we may have for you.”

“Of course, sir.”

After Mr Barnes had left the office, Mr Nostigon settled down on the wide back of the sofa, shaking his head. “Sorry, boys—of course this is not how I had envisaged today’s programme for you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the First Investigator replied with an encouraging smile. “From experience, emergencies don’t tend to follow programmes.”

“The main thing is that Mr Calbourn was saved,” agreed Bob. “Where is he being taken to now?”

“The hotel has its own infirmary,” Mr Nostigon said. “Further care will be given there. After that, it will be decided whether he needs to be taken to a hospital.”

Pete looked thoughtfully at the spot on the floor where the journalist had been lying. “Apparently he suffered a sudden collapse so violent that he was unable to call for help.”

“Precisely summed up,” Jupiter agreed, letting his probing gaze roam the room. Then he pointed to the left side of the tubular steel desk. “The fallen red vial there, next to the fax machine, might give us some clues.”

Curious, Bob approached the table and examined the find. “This is a mini spray. The cap’s still on it... The label reads ‘*Dorangin Acute*—one spray of 48 milligrams contains 0.4 milligrams of *glycerol trinitrate*.’”

“*Dorangin*?” asked Pete, catching his breath. “That tells me something.”

Mr Nostigon tilted his head in amazement. “Really?”

“I don’t think I’m mistaken...” Pondering, the Second Investigator scratched his temple. “Every now and then I mow the lawn at an old friend of my grandfather’s. The man has a bad heart condition and is on heavy medication. Sometimes he gets a little mixed up with his medication, but there’s one thing he basically always has with him.”

“—Namely, a red spray bottle,” Jupiter concluded.

“Exactly. He had a small leather case made specially for it so that he could always wear it on his belt. At some point I just asked him about it, and that’s when he explained to me how this *Dorangin* works. When he has a heart attack, he has to spray it twice in his mouth to make the coronary arteries dilate again.”

“Chest pains caused by reduced blood flow to the heart,” Mr Nostigon now intervened again. “Spasmodic heart constrictions, triggered by advanced hardening of the arteries.”

Bob nodded gravely. “Then the matter is clear—Mr Calbourn had an acute heart attack, reached for his emergency spray, but didn’t manage to use it.”

“He dropped the spray bottle and it rolled next to the fax machine,” Pete added. “Then he collapsed next to the desk.”

“That might also explain the sound Mr Barnes heard earlier,” Nostigon noted. “It probably wasn’t a giggle at all, but a strangled gasp.”

“Sounds quite plausible,” Jupiter replied. “The only question that remains is whether there was a specific external cause for the collapse. As far as I know, such a heart attack can be caused by physical as well as mental stress. Since we can certainly rule out Mr Calbourn having run a marathon in this office, I’m going with the second possibility.”

Bob listened up. “So you mean something upset him so much that caused him to have a heart attack? Perhaps that could also be the reason for his early arrival...”

“If so, with any luck we’ll find a clue in his schedule,” Pete suggested, pointing to a small ring binder lying on top of a filing cabinet.

Expectantly, Jupiter looked at Mr Nostigon. “Do you think it’s okay if we take a quick look inside?”

The security chief pursed his lips into an exhausted smile, and then nodded. “Since this is a matter of clarifying a serious incident, I believe this intrusion into Mr Calbourn’s privacy is permissible.”

Quickly Juve took the diary and flipped to 23rd December. “Hmm... unfortunately no clue. There are only several appointments noted here until six in the evening. No earlier entries for today. This at least adds to our suspicions that Mr Calbourn had, until recently, planned not to arrive at Crystal Pike until the evening.”

“But then something caused him to throw out his original plan and arrive much earlier,” Bob added.

“Obviously something that really shook him up,” Pete added.

Nostigon rose. “Well, I suppose we won’t know any more details until Mr Calbourn is responsive again. Until then, we have—” He suddenly paused and looked at the First

Investigator, who now stood in a stooped posture beside the overturned office chair, narrowing his eyes broodingly. “You look as if you’ve discovered something.”

“Possibly. Give me a little time,” Jupiter replied tensely and looked back and forth on the floor for a while.

“May I ask what you are doing?” finally Pete enquired impatiently.

“I might be wrong...” Jupe explained, “but the tracks of this rolling chair seem most peculiar to me.”

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise. “The tracks of the rolling chair?”

“Exactly,” Jupiter replied, pointing to the floor in front of him. “On the soft carpet, the fresh imprints of the castors are still clearly visible, despite all the other traces added by us. Normally, the use of such office chairs is limited to the immediate vicinity of the desk, that is, the brief rolling back and forth when one sits down or stands up. But here...”

“... The tracks lead once across the room to the wall and back again,” Mr Nostigon finished, frowning, “as if Mr Calbourn had rolled on the chair several metres to the right and then back again before collapsing.”

“That’s right.” The First Investigator dropped to a crouch. “The drag marks on the sides indicate that he laboriously pushed himself forward and backward with his heels.”

“That’s really strange,” Bob admitted. “If Calbourn was still able to respond despite the heart attack, surely he would have tried to call for help by phone.”

Pete nodded. “And he should have managed to use the emergency spray before he lost consciousness.”

“Instead, with the last of his strength, he rolled to the end of the room and back again...” muttered Nostigon in confusion and, lost in thought, picked up Mr Calbourn’s jacket, which was half hanging over the back of the chair. As he did so, a wallet slipped out and fell to the floor.

Jupiter, still crouching, instinctively glanced at the wallet compartments. Dumbfounded, he faltered. “Something’s fishy.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Bob in surprise.

Stunned, Jupiter pulled out a brand-new looking blue plastic card, the top lettering of which had immediately caught his eye. “This here is the badge of the NAUI—the National Association of Underwater Instructors.”

“Wait a minute,” Pete cut in. He, too, had grasped the implications of the discovery at once. “Mr Calbourn has... a diving licence?”

“To be more precise, he apparently just recently completed training as a freelance scuba diving instructor,” Jupe confirmed.

Thunderstruck, Nostigon stared at the First Investigator. “Someone who has a heart condition so acute that must be treated with emergency spray could not possibly train to be a diving instructor. There is too much risk of a seizure under water.”

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Bob turned his gaze back to the red spray bottle. “But... that would mean...”

“... That Mr Calbourn may not have had a heart attack at all, but was the victim of an insidious attack,” Jupiter finished the sentence with a petrified face.

20 Hours Left

23rd December, 4 pm.

It was clear that Mr Nostigon's thoughts were in turmoil. In the meantime, Mr Nostigon informed the security office that he was busy with the investigation of the Calbourn case until further notice. Therefore his deputy Catelyn McBride would take over the operational tasks.

"So you think someone made an attempt on Mr Calbourn's life and then made it look like it was a heart attack?" Mr Nostigon asked after he put away his mobile phone.

"Of course, it's still too early to take stock of the situation," Jupiter replied in his usual matter-of-fact manner, "but the fact is that the supposedly clear-cut circumstances of this incident show considerable inconsistencies on closer inspection.

"Let's summarize... Here we have a journalist who has collapsed and an emergency spray for the treatment of convulsive heart attacks—which, by the way, is quite demonstratively visible. Then we also have this..." the First Investigator held up the diving licence. "It turns out that the man is obviously in perfect health and even so fit that he has recently completed training as a scuba diving instructor."

"Not to mention the strange marks left by the office chair," Pete added.

Jupiter nodded. "That's right. If Mr Calbourn really had a heart attack, it would be utterly inexplicable why he still had enough time to move several metres across the room in his chair but failed to take his spray and alert help." He pointed to the carpet. "On the other hand, if we hypothesize that some unknown person, by whatever means, fed him a poisonous substance, then the tangle of prints could also be interpreted as traces of a struggle."

"A desperate struggle with the culprit, but already too weak to get up out of the chair," added Bob in a strained voice. "Then shortly afterwards his strength failed him and he crashed to the floor."

Nostigon frowned sceptically. "If it really did happen that way, though, the attack wouldn't have been very carefully prepared. Even if we hadn't discovered the diving licence, it would have come out sooner or later that Mr Calbourn didn't have heart problems at all."

"Not necessarily," objected the First Investigator. "We must not disregard the fact that the culprit was disturbed by the sudden appearance of Mr Barnes."

"That's why he had to leave in a hurry to avoid being caught," Pete concluded.

"Quite right," Jupiter replied. "If the cleaner hadn't shown up, the perpetrator would certainly have finished covering-up the crime scene, including checking the wallet and removing any suspicious traces. Who knows—there may have been other things done behind the scenes to complete the deception, for example, the falsification of medical records."

"As crazy as it sounds at first, that plan might have actually worked," Bob took the floor, "because I just remembered why the name Calbourn sounds so familiar."

"Which is?" asked Pete tensely.

"Desmond Calbourn has also worked for the *Los Angeles Times* in the past, writing some spectacular investigative articles. If I remember correctly, my father mentioned that he's a pretty arrogant loner who almost exclusively goes solo, works around the clock, has no family and hardly any friends. So I doubt anyone knows any more specifics about his health."

“I see...” Still frowning, Nostigon reached for his mobile phone. “Although the whole matter remains completely unclear, to be on the safe side, I will call the infirmary and report that it may be poisoning. I’m also going to ask that Mr Calbourn remain under supervision at all times.”

“Good idea, sir,” replied the Second Investigator. “If we really did prevent a murder, the perpetrator might try to strike again.”

The phone call was short and Mr Nostigon’s expression remained worried when he hung up.

“Mr Calbourn’s condition is reasonably stable, but he remains unconscious. So it will be a while before we know what really happened. Also, the results of the blood analysis won’t be available for at least a few hours.”

Prompting, Jupiter looked at him. “All the more important that we make good use of the time until then.”

“You’re right...” Mr Nostigon straightened his shoulders and let a long glance sweep over the entire office. “With our rescue operation, we’ve probably wiped out any viable leads on the carpet, and the facts are still too sketchy for an official investigation. However, it’s all enough to do a thorough search of this room.” He turned back to the boys. “After all, the most important question is still entirely open.”

“Indeed it is, sir,” Jupiter confirmed. There was a familiar glint in his eyes now. “If there really was an attack here—how did the intruder escape from a room locked from the inside with the blinds down and the windows closed?”

19 Hours Left

23rd December, 5 pm.

Since the beginning of their search for a hidden entrance, some time had passed, but no success had been achieved.

“Such a washout...” observed Pete, annoyed. “No secret door, no opening in the wall—nothing at all.”

“Most peculiar indeed,” the First Investigator admitted, turning to Mr Nostigon. “Is it conceivable then that the perpetrator or perpetrators left the room and then, by some technical trick, managed to reactivate the interior lock?”

Thoughtfully, Mr Nostigon stroked his forehead. “I can’t rule it out, but I’ll have to call in an expert to sort it out.”

“Even if such a trick was possible, no one could have escaped from the room unseen, because the cleaner was at the corridor all the time,” Bob interjected.

Jupe shook his head. “Not so... Earlier, Mr Barnes mentioned that after there was no response to his knocking, he had gone to the checkpoint at the end of the corridor to report. The perpetrator could very well have used that brief window of opportunity to escape.”

“As I said—I’ll get the technical aspects sorted out... but before that...” Mr Nostigon gestured to the table where the journalist’s jacket, wallet and diary were now lying, “... we should check if there is any clue in Calbourn’s things that can help us.”

Highly concentrated, the four of them set to work, always careful not to overlook even the smallest detail.

Suddenly Pete faltered and held Mr Calbourn’s jacket, which he was examining, closer to his eyes. “Fellas, this could be a jackpot!”

“What, Pete?” asked Jupiter in surprise.

Pete tugged at the jacket’s left sleeve. “We don’t have a crime lab here, but even so, I bet that these two long, orange furry hairs belong to a certain monkey man!”

“Great find!” Nostigon replied. “That’s not proof of guilt yet, but at least we now know that Beastor, or rather the actor Chris Roth, was in contact with him before Calbourn’s collapse.”

Bob pulled out his notebook. “Then I’ll put this Roth guy on our list of possible suspects.”

Jupiter pointed to a line in the diary he was flipping through. “Since you’re writing that down, you might add another name—L. Taggart.”

“Lawrence Taggart?” Perplexed, the security chief paused. “That’s the head of Fun Fellows! Why should he be a suspect?”

“Because Mr Calbourn’s schedule has Taggart’s name on it for nine o’clock this evening,” Jupiter explained. “I hadn’t read up to that point earlier, because we were only concerned with the morning and afternoon period to begin with.”

Bob shrugged. “Fair enough, so he was going to meet with the boss of this toy company. That doesn’t say anything though.”

“Not just that,” Jupe countered. “Things look a lot different if you consider what he noted for the appointment—‘Heroes Intrigue’.”

“Oh gosh...” murmured Pete.

Nostigon raised his hand admonishingly. “We shouldn’t jump to conclusions now. An entry in a schedule does not make one a criminal.”

“No doubt you’re right about that,” Jupiter agreed with him, “but along with Beastor’s hair, this note is now the second direct link to Fun Fellows and the *Heroes of the Universe*.”

“Three, if we count this ticket from Galaxy Con...” Bob added, pointing to a shiny silver ticket he had spotted in the journalist’s wallet. “Apparently Mr Calbourn was at this science fiction and fantasy convention in Malibu two weeks ago. According to the text on the back of the ticket, *Heroes* action figures and series creator Mason Wachinski was at the event as well.”

The security chief shook his head. “Boys, I think you’re getting it wrong. After all, we mustn’t forget the purpose for which Mr Calbourn came here. After all, he was to give the keynote address at the launch of the *Heroes* action figures tomorrow. Surely it’s only natural that he should study the subject in some detail beforehand.”

“No objection to your point,” Jupiter replied firmly, “on the contrary—that is precisely the point.”

“Oh, yeah?” asked Pete, puzzled. “And why is that?”

“In our previous deliberations, we have so far neglected one elementary factor, and that is the possible motive of the perpetrator.”

“I have an inkling of what you’re driving at, Juve!” chimed in Bob. “Mr Calbourn is a journalist known for sensational investigative stories. Now let’s imagine that in his research into *Heroes*, he came across something suspicious.”

Uncertainly, Pete looked at his friends. “You mean something like a... dark secret?”

“The words ‘Heroes’ and ‘Intrigue’ certainly provide a basis for that conjecture.” Jupiter made a sweeping gesture. “So if Calbourn was indeed on the trail of a scandal, he may have planned to use the media frenzy at tomorrow’s gala to drop his bombshell. After all, he’s a man who loves big headlines.”

Mr Nostigon pressed his lips together. “If you are right with your assumption, there would indeed be a valid motive for the crime. After all, the multi-million dollar launch of the *Heroes of the Universe* is linked to enormous interests from various parties. A scandal during the big presentation tomorrow would cause a real earthquake—with unforeseeable consequences.”

“This suddenly puts our previous suspects in a whole new light,” Bob noted. “After all, they’re all hoping for a huge pile of money and new stardom from the triumph of the *Heroes* action figures.” Hesitantly, he paused. “Then we’ll have to add at least one more name to our list though.”

“Dwight Fillmore,” replied the Second Investigator. “After all, for the creator of these revolutionary toys, his entire professional future is at stake.”

Sceptically, Mr Nostigon scratched his ear. “Guys, I know you shouldn’t judge people on first impressions, but I met Dwight yesterday at a pre-meeting for the gala, and I’ve rarely met a guy as shy and amiably harmless as him in my life. So unless my instincts as a cop are completely rusty, Dwight Fillmore definitely doesn’t have what it takes to be a criminal.”

“We take note of that, of course, sir,” Jupiter stated. “Nevertheless, we owe it to our investigative duty to scrutinize every potential suspect.”

Nodding, Bob looked at his notebook. “So as it stands now, that would be Fun Fellows boss Lawrence Taggart, Beastor actor Chris Roth, character developer Dwight Fillmore, and series creator Mason Wachinski. For any of them, the failure of *Heroes* would be a disaster.”

“And to prevent this catastrophe, the culprit wanted to stop Mr Calbourn before he went public,” Pete finished the thought with a grim expression.

Lowering his head, the security chief paced. “But what could Calbourn have come across that would pose such a danger? Here in this room, at any rate, we have found no clue—” Suddenly he paused in mid-motion.

“What have you got?” asked Jupiter in surprise.

Hesitantly, Nostigon walked back to where the journalist had been lying. “I just remembered something I hadn’t thought of in all the commotion. For a brief moment, Mr Calbourn had come to his senses earlier, and before he passed out again, he whispered something.”

Pete’s eyes widened in amazement. “I didn’t catch that at all. What did he say?”

“It didn’t make sense, so I assumed he was fantasizing... but now, in retrospect...” Nostigon’s gaze clouded and he lapsed into silence.

Cautiously, as if approaching a sleepwalker he didn’t want to wake, the First Investigator asked him. “Sir, what did Mr Calbourn tell you?”

“It... was just two words...” The security chief raised his head and looked Jupiter straight in the eye. “Ivory Woman.”

18 Hours Left

23rd December, 6 pm.

Visibly puzzled, Bob tilted his head. "Ivory Woman? What could Mr Calbourn possibly have meant by that?"

Lost in thought, Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "An exceedingly peculiar name indeed. If we pursue for the moment the assumption that Mr Calbourn was not fantasizing, we must assume that he meant to give some hint."

"If it is indeed about a scandal on *Heroes*, it could be the name of a certain character," Pete reasoned.

"Excellent idea!" praised the First Investigator, glancing around. "So, does that name ring any bells?"

Pondering, Bob massaged the root of his nose. "Hmm... I don't recall an Ivory Woman, at least on the TV show... but wait... isn't there some evil sorceress whose name starts with 'E'?"

Euphorically, Pete snapped his fingers. "That's right, Evil Elva!" He turned to Nostigon expectantly. "Could it possibly have been that name Mr Calbourn whispered?"

Mr Nostigon shook his head vigorously. "No, it doesn't match from the sound and the syllables. I'm really almost one hundred percent sure he said 'Ivory Woman'."

Jupe sighed. "Then, at least on that point, the approach with the toys runs into nothing. Unless, of course, that strange name, while not referring to *Heroes*, is referring to some other toy line."

"That doesn't seem very conclusive to me," Nostigon replied, "but I'll certainly make some enquiries along that line."

"What if it was meant literally?" asked Bob. "Perhaps it has to do with an ivory ornament of some kind."

"Or it's simply a secret code word to throw us off," Pete added.

Reluctantly, Jupe wiped an annoying strand of hair from his forehead. "As frustrating as it is at this point, we're not getting anywhere."

"I'm afraid so too," Nostigon added, straightening his tie. "Therefore we should now turn our attention to Mr Calbourn's hotel room. We may come across more solid clues there. After that, we'll move on to the suspects and their alibis."

"So you're handling the whole thing internally for now, without the police?" Bob enquired.

"Yes. Until it is established beyond a doubt that a crime has been committed here, my hands are tied. Without evidence, I can't possibly make a murder allegation and jeopardize the course of the entire fair."

Frowning, Pete scratched his chin. "True... An official investigation would make huge waves, of course, and then if it turns out it was just an accident, the damage would be irreparable."

"I too think that at this point we should still act quietly and below the public radar," Jupiter agreed. "Once we know for sure, we can always call in the police."

Bob took a deep breath. “Okay, so in plain English, that means The Three Investigators have a new case!”

“And this time it will be a real race against time,” Pete added, “because tomorrow at noon is the big Christmas Eve gala. After that, all the fair participants take off on their Christmas vacation, possibly never to be seen again.”

“That leaves us just under eighteen hours,” Jupiter announced, turning his gaze to Mr Nostigon. “What do you say we split up for a while? While you and Pete check out the hotel room, Bob and I could go ahead and approach Chris ‘Beastor’ Roth—with due discretion, of course.”

“We’d have a starting point for a conversation,” Bob added. “After all, I was one of the ‘chosen ones’ from Beastor’s lottery. So it would be absolutely nothing out of the ordinary if I’d like to know a little more about *Heroes* and the presentation tomorrow.”

“And two nosy guys are always less suspicious than the security chief at the fair when it comes to an interrogation like this,” Pete added, secretly glad to be assigned to the hotel room for the time being. He could well do without another encounter with the possibly murderous monkey monster.

“Sounds reasonable.” Mr Nostigon agreed. “Okay, then the first thing I’ll do is call Catelyn at the security office and have her arrange for Calbourn’s personal effects to be picked up here and kept safe. Also, I’ll have a security guard keep an eye on this room—unobtrusively and at a proper distance, of course.”

“A sensible measure,” Bob replied. “After all, the intruder could return to the scene to finish the interrupted clean-up.”

“If that happens, we’ll get him,” the security chief said grimly, stepping out into the corridor.

As Jupiter followed him, a smile suddenly spread across his face. “And even if we don’t, with any luck, we may know the face of the culprit before long.”

“How is that so?” asked the Second Investigator, puzzled.

Nostigon slapped his forehead. “I don’t believe it! Here I am raving to you at length earlier about the excellent video surveillance, and then I completely forgot about it!” Shaking his head, he closed the room door and pointed to the ceiling. “This corridor is also equipped with security cameras. As we know, Mr Calbourn passed the checkpoint on this level at 2 pm, and we arrived here under an hour later, at just before three.”

“I see,” Bob remarked. “All that’s necessary, then, is for the security office to check who, besides Mr Calbourn, entered Room D-609 between 2 and 2:55 pm. The person in question is most likely the culprit!”

“That’s right, but to be on the safe side, I’m going to move the start of the time window earlier to noon. It is not impossible that the perpetrator or perpetrators have already gained access and confronted Calbourn when he entered the room. Also, I’ll get from the checkpoint the names of all the people who entered and left this area during the period in question.” Nostigon pulled out his mobile phone. “But for now, I’ll call in to the security office.”

The phone call lasted much longer than expected and the security chief’s sharper tone suggested that he was not at all satisfied with the information he had received.

“I don’t believe it...” he hissed in annoyance as he pocketed his mobile phone.

Irritated, Jupiter frowned. “Problems?”

“Indeed.” Annoyed, Nostigon pointed to one of the cameras on the corridor ceiling. “Catelyn has just informed me that there has been a system failure throughout Section D for reasons yet unexplained.”

“A system failure?” asked Pete, puzzled.

Nostigon shrugged. “She couldn’t tell me any more specifics, but for the time being, all camera footage from this afternoon is unusable. Efforts are being made to reconstruct the image data, but success is uncertain.”

Jupiter looked down the corridor with a sombre expression. “In Room D-609, Mr Calbourn suffers a mysterious breakdown and in equally mysterious fashion, all the video recordings from the corridor cameras are unusable. It’s a bit of a bizarre coincidence... if it really is a coincidence.”

17 Hours Left

December 23, 7 pm.

After Bob and Jupiter had left to return to the exhibition hall, Mr Nostigon and Pete had gone to the checkpoint at the beginning of the corridor.

The information they had received from the security guard there, however, had been anything but revealing. According to the log, only Mr Calbourn, two toy company employees on their way to their offices, a security guard on routine patrol, and finally Mr Barnes from the Maintenance team had entered the corridor during the time period in question. Even the subsequent conversation with the security guard, who seemed genuinely astonished, had yielded no further insight. As it was, nothing conspicuous had happened in the entire corridor of Section D.

Disgruntled, Pete now followed Mr Nostigon towards the lifts. “Unfortunately, that didn’t get us any further. Why, in fact, are the rooms in this wing hardly used? Apart from Room D-609, only two other rooms are occupied, and those people who were in their rooms were only there for a very short time.”

“That’s probably because this level is the furthest from Fairground Hall,” Mr Nostigon surmised, pressing the lift button. “In any case, those other people here do not seem to have any connection to Calbourn or *Heroes*.”

“So it seems,” Pete replied, glancing at the notes he had made earlier. “Mrs Tembryne in Room D-603 is with the Gambuild Corporation, which specializes in environmentally friendly wooden board games, and Mr Petrescu in Room D-608 is a press officer for a small niche company focusing on pet toys.”

“So there’s no connection to the space fighters of Fun Fellows...” Sighing, Nostigon crossed his arms. “So let’s hope we’re more successful at the hotel room.”

Shortly thereafter, the lift door opened and the two entered the cabin. On the way to the ground floor, several animatedly chatting people got on.

Only an elderly lady in the opposite corner of the lift stood apart from the others. Without knowing the reason, something about her caught Pete’s attention. Unobtrusively, he kept an eye on her. The woman was of average height, but decidedly gaunt, and wore a perfectly fitting charcoal grey suit. A long, light-coloured scarf seemed to literally blur the contours between her neck and her already narrow shoulders. Her snow-white hair was combed back tightly and tied in a knot at the back of her head.

What Pete found most peculiar, however, was her face. The parchment-like skin was as pale as a ghost, and her forehead and hair seemed to blend together without transition, as if this motionless, bolt upright woman was not flesh and blood at all, but a scrawny cold and white sculpture that had come to life. Suddenly, like a glaring flash, the utterance of Mr Calbourn came back to the Second Investigator’s mind—Ivory Woman...

At the same moment, he also remembered the disturbing giggle the cleaner had heard behind the closed door. Just as Pete was about to turn to Mr Nostigon, he noticed in horror that the strange woman was now no longer looking at the lift door in front of her, but had turned her head, staring directly at him! Her small, piercing black eyes seemed to literally pierce Pete while her thin lips twisted into a sickening grin.

In the meantime, Jupe and Bob had already spent what felt like an eternity fighting their way bit by bit through the dense hustle and bustle of Fairground Hall in search of Beastor. The change from the almost deserted office wing to the glittering, pulsating Christmas world was breathtaking in the truest sense of the word.

"I can't believe what's still going on here," Bob grumbled as he meandered past a group that was gazing at a three-dimensional model of the Empire State Building, nearly three metres tall, with a King Kong figure in a red Christmas hat perched atop it.

Jupe unfolded a small brochure he had picked up at an information booth. "The gates of the hall don't close until ten o'clock. After that, the evening programme begins in the bars and clubs of the Grand Lodge."

"Probably also accompanied by continuous Christmas tunes," speculated Bob, who was getting very annoyed with the now third repetition of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. "I don't mind festive cheer, but this is like a roller-coaster ride in a bludgeoning Christmas sleigh. It'll make you sick at some point..."

Jupiter nodded. "Totally agree, Bob. All the more urgent that we finally find this furry monster."

They now reached the middle of the huge hall where there was a circular stage with a romantic artificial snow landscape and a colourfully decorated Christmas tree. A bright sign announced that this was the North Pole, and right next to it was an impressive Santa Claus enthroned on an imposing red plush chair. A group of charming young ladies in green elf costumes danced around him with amazing acrobatic skill and threw little candy canes into the crowd, while Santa Claus waved at the passing visitors in the ever-changing rhythm and belted out a booming 'ho-ho-ho!'

"Well, that wouldn't be a job for me," Bob stated.

Jupiter grinned mockingly. "Well, why not? I'm sure a fancy little dress like that would look great on you."

"Very funny," growled Bob, "but seriously—if I had to sit in a stuffy exhibition hall with a thick winter coat, bobble hat and scraggly full beard and yell 'ho-ho-ho' incessantly, I'd go batty after half an hour at the latest."

"Maybe you can call out 'Merry Christmas' in between for a change," Jupiter replied with a grin. Then he stopped in his tracks.

"What is it?" Irritated, Bob stopped as well. "Now don't tell me you want a candy cane from Santa's elves?"

The First Investigator looked at him reprovingly. "Although, in view of the advanced hour, the desire to eat soon is obvious, however, I have to put that on hold. You see, your comment about Santa has given me an idea."

"Which is?"

"As you quite rightly pointed out, Santa's job is not exactly varied. While I suppose he does get to walk around the hall now and then, his main job really seems to be stationed on this stage... and from his elevated position, of course, he has an extremely good overview of all the action. Besides, he certainly knows all about the other attractions at the fair."

Bob nodded. "I see. You mean we should ask him if he knows where Beastor is hanging out right now."

"Precisely." Jupe pointed to the right side of the stage. "Over there are the steps up the stage... so let's pay Santa Claus a little visit."

In fact, it was no problem for the two investigators to approach the broadly smiling Santa Claus, who was visibly pleased about the little change. However, when he found out what the two visitors wanted. His mood changed unexpectedly.

“So you guys too?” he hissed at the boys, clenching his fists angrily. “Is everyone here really obsessed with those space idiots? Heroes here, Heroes there, from morning till night—I can’t stand it anymore! Is this a Christmas fair or a circus for freaks?”

“Uh...” Uncertain, Jupiter had taken a step back. “To be precise, it is a toy fair, and naturally there will be—”

But that was as far as the First Investigator got, for now the fury-red Santa cut him off with a harsh gesture toward the stairs. “Get out of my kingdom! Followers of these galactic numbskulls have no business in my North Pole!” The request was unmistakable.

Disappointed and confused, Jupiter and Bob got off the stage. Just as they were about to continue their way through the hall, someone tapped Bob on the shoulder. Puzzled, he turned and looked into the bright blue eyes of an elf dancer. She had waist-length blonde hair with countless glittering beads woven into it, and the pointed artificial ears looked deceptively real.

“Before you go, I want to apologize to you for the boss’s behaviour,” she said in a lowered voice. “I’m really sorry about that, but *Heroes* are just a red rag to him.”

“Oh, really?” asked Bob wryly. “We hadn’t noticed that at all.”

Tensely, Jupiter stepped closer. “Do you also happen to know why this subject makes him so angry?”

“This is mainly due to the gala tomorrow. In recent years, Santa Claus has traditionally been the crowning highlight of the fair with a big show. It’s a huge event, also in terms of the fee.”

“But this year, his appearance has been cancelled and it’s all about the space characters,” the First Investigator added.

The young woman nodded. “Exactly. My boss says it’s a huge mess and they’re selling the soul of GameFame on it. He sees the hype surrounding *Heroes* as the beginning of the end for his traditional Santa show. He’s also worried that this will open the floodgates to other events.”

“And that’s why he wishes the plague on everyone involved,” Bob concluded.

“Especially the publicity people and journalists who hype it up so much,” the dancer replied. “One of them is at the top of his hate list—the guy who’s going to give the keynote address for *Heroes* tomorrow in the main event. I think he’d like to wring that guy’s neck.”

“Most interesting...” Jupiter remarked while narrowing his eyes and looked up at Santa, who by now was happily waving to the crowd again.

16 Hours Left

23rd December, 8 pm.

Pete was still struggling with the slip-up he had made in the lift earlier. For a brief moment, he had been paralyzed by the almost hypnotic gaze of the grinning woman, and when the lift door had opened a second later, she had instantly disappeared into the dense crowd of Fairground Hall.

The frantic search that followed, in which Mr Nostigon had also participated, albeit somewhat confusedly, had been fruitless. After the security chief had subsequently been informed by the Second Investigator of the whole strange experience, he had reported it to the security office. The security officers were to keep a discreet lookout for a gaunt, unusually pale, white-haired woman. Meanwhile, Pete had contacted his astonished friends by mobile phone and told them about the appearance of the Ivory Woman in the flesh.

In view of the vague description, the chances of finding her in the hustle and bustle of the fair were minimal, as there were certainly several hundred older white-haired people around at the time.

On their way to the hotel area of the Grand Lodge, Mr Nostigon and Pete were promptly delayed several times by radio reports about supposed sightings of the pale woman, which all turned out to be mistakes.

With a considerable loss of time, they finally reached the hotel and Mr Calbourn's Room 824. Because of the serious suspicion of an attack, the security chief considered it imperative to find further clues as quickly as possible. After opening the room by means of his master access card, they immediately began to examine it.

At the end of the mission, Pete drew a sobering conclusion: "Well, I've examined many a room and even whole houses in my time as an investigator, but this is about the most unspectacular thing I've ever seen."

The security chief sighed in agreement. "Except for the few articles of clothing and bathroom items in Calbourn's suitcase, there are no personal items here that could help us in any way—no mobile phone, no laptop, nothing."

"And we didn't find any of such devices in Room D-609," Pete added, getting down on his knees and glancing again into a blue suitcase. "Surely, as a journalist, Mr Calbourn wasn't living behind the moon... and here—the edges of the laptop compartment in his suitcase are a bit worn out so he must have a device like this."

Mr Nostigon nodded, frowning. "If he had brought a mobile phone or a laptop with him to Section D, we saw that the devices were not there, so they might have been taken from him."

"That's the way it must have been but..." Stumbling, the still-kneeling Second Investigator lowered his gaze a little and leaned over to the small bedside table. "Whoops, what's this?" Carefully, he detached a small object that had been taped under the tabletop.

Tensely, Nostigon stepped closer. "Well, what is it?"

"A business card," Pete replied, puzzled. "On the back, Calbourn wrote something down in ballpoint pen: 'Gilligan—VII'. Sounds like some kind of code."

"Perhaps this is a vital clue to Calbourn's secret!" Mr Nostigon reflected excitedly.

Then the Second Investigator turned the business card over—and opened his eyes in bewilderment. “I don’t believe it...”

“Why? What does it say?” asked Nostigon, perplexed.

Still completely aghast, Pete read the elegant imprint in a hoarse voice. “‘Bill Andrews. *Los Angeles Times*’... Bob’s father!”

After Jupiter and Bob had received some more information from the friendly Christmas dancer, including the location of the Fun Fellows booth, they had once again dived into the hustle and bustle. On their long walk to Aisle K, the amazing new findings had then of course been the focus of their conversation.

“Let’s consolidate what we know,” Bob finally said. “Up to now, we have assumed that the motive for the attack could be an explosive secret with which Mr Calbourn wants to blow up at the big Christmas Eve gala tomorrow. Accordingly, we suspected the perpetrator to be someone close to Fun Fellows who wants to ensure a smooth start to the revitalization of *Heroes* at all costs. Instead, however, it could be the other way around.”

“That is, if instead of a *Heroes* participant, a deeply frustrated hater of these space characters was responsible for the attack on Mr Calbourn,” Jupe added, “and it could be none other than Santa Claus himself. In that case, there would be no *Heroes* secret to be revealed.”

“... But solely a vengeful Santa Claus who, along with an equally evil Ivory Woman, wants to stop the great resurgence of the galactic heroes,” Bob finished the train of thought. “That would really be a bummer, though... and basically completely pointless too. Fun Fellows will go through with the gala anyway—if need be, company boss Taggart himself will stand at the lectern and explain how super his new toy is.”

Jupiter nodded in agreement. “Undoubtedly true... but, after all, we know from our own experience that the behaviour of criminals need not be rational. From the Christmas elf, we have at least obtained information that Santa Claus left his North Pole for an hour around half past one to stretch his legs. In terms of the time factor, therefore, he could well have committed the crime.”

“So Santa Claus goes on our suspect list—right below Chris Roth, Lawrence Taggart, Dwight Fillmore, Mason Wachinski, and the pale lady.” Sighing, Bob stroked his hair. “If only the security office could recover the camera footage. Then all this guessing about who did it would end.”

“Possibly that’s the very reason why they couldn’t do it...” murmured the First Investigator, but before he could continue that thought, Bob raised his right hand and pointed ahead.

About ten metres away, an impressive space backdrop loomed with countless twinkling artificial stars. The massive lettering in the centre left no doubt that this was the *Heroes of the Universe* booth. At a shiny silver counter that looked like the command desk of a spaceship, stood an exotically costumed warrior signing autographs.

“That is Alexis van Loren who plays Reela, the fair princess of Neteria,” Bob noted, tilting his head sceptically, “and judging by the unnaturally rigid facial expressions, there are various plastic surgeons active on her planet.”

“Even heroes can be vain,” Jupiter replied with a grin. “What I find much more interesting, however, is what’s going on over there at the back of the booth. If I’m not mistaken, the sinister Skulldor and the glorious Free-Man are having a heated exchange of words, and that certainly doesn’t seem to be part of the official programme.” He gestured

towards a narrow side passage. “If we post ourselves inconspicuously behind that dummy volcano over there, we might be able to eavesdrop on what it’s all about.”

Quietly, the two investigators managed to take up position behind the mighty cardboard structure. To be on the safe side, they pocketed their ID cards.

Just then, the anger-red Free-Man raised both hands and gestured wildly in the air. “What do you mean ‘no other choice’? This is utter insanity!”

“You’re not entitled to that kind of judgement at all!” the man in the creepy skeletal mask hissed. “It’s not like you and Alexis are affected!”

“But I do, and so does just about everyone else!” another, much higher voice spoke up now.

Surprised, Bob and Jupiter peered through a crevice in the crater and caught sight of a third person who, because of his small size, had been hidden by the planetary decorations until then. The boys immediately recognized the short man as Quorko, the clumsy goblin wizard. He was wearing a red cloak that reached to the ground and a wide-brimmed hat that further shrouded his masked face in deep shadow.

The wizard shook his right fist in the direction of Skulldor. “Still, none of us would think of walking over dead bodies to pull off such an action! Have you no conscience at all? Such a thing can—”

At that moment, the goblin hesitated and then continued in a weird sing-song manner:

*Oh, mighty Heroes with no fear;
Does Quorko sense some visitors here?*

At those words, he whirled around and pointed an outstretched forefinger at the stunned investigators. Instantly the blond hunk rushed up, reached behind the cratered backdrop and grabbed the boys by the arm.

“Have you come here to eavesdrop on us?”

15 Hours Left

December 23, 9 pm.

After the first moment of surprise, Pete recalled a basic investigation rule that Jupiter was always preaching: ‘Every element of a case, however obscure, must be viewed with sober objectivity.’

That had actually helped, for on second glance at least, it had ceased to be surprising that Mr Calbourn possessed a business card from Bob’s father. After all, the journalist had worked for the *Los Angeles Times* and knew Mr Andrews.

The Second Investigator had therefore agreed with Mr Nostigon that only a phone call could clarify a possible connection between Bill Andrews and the strange code. Since Bob’s father was presumably not in his newsroom at that hour, Pete had used his mobile phone to dial the Andrews family’s home number. The subsequent conversation had been extensive and intense.

Tensely, Nostigon looked at the boy. “If I understood correctly, Mr Andrews was actually able to help you.”

“Yes, however he clearly has no idea of the events here. That’s why it wasn’t easy to explain the incident with Mr Calbourn to him in a way he could half understand without worrying him too much.”

Pete felt guilty about keeping from Bob’s father the suspicion that an attempt might have been made on the journalist’s life. After all, it wouldn’t have helped anyone to cause a stir in far-off Rocky Beach, even though the situation was still completely unclear.

“So what’s the deal with this code?” the security chief asked.

Pete glanced at the slip of paper with notes he had made. “The whole thing goes back to a *Los Angeles Times* press ball three years ago, where there were lots of celebrities and, accordingly, lots of cameras. At the time, Mr Calbourn was working in Bob’s father’s newsroom. I guess he was on to something hot that could take a decisive turn at any moment.”

Nostigon nodded. “I have an inkling of what went on then. Since an important new development might occur during the party, Calbourn arranged with Mr Andrews for a code word. This would make it possible to slip out of any small-talk sessions unobtrusively if necessary.”

“That’s right,” confirmed the Second Investigator. “Coincidentally, it had come out earlier that they were both enthralled with the *Gilligan’s Island* series when they were kids. So as soon as the cue word ‘Gilligan’ came up, Bob’s father knew that Mr Calbourn wanted to meet him in a secluded office in the annex—away from prying eyes and ears.”

“Just as if he were on a safe island there to tell him vital information for an upcoming article,” the security chief added, eyes widening with tension. “So now, years later, if Calbourn leaves that code word again on one of Mr Andrews’s business cards, then...”

“... Then he did it because he knew that only Bob’s father would understand that clue!” Pete finished the sentence. “There was probably no one else he really trusted, not even security. So if there really was a dark secret involved here, Mr Calbourn obviously knew that

he was on to it. That's why he wanted to take precautions in case something happened to him—perhaps a hiding place that only Mr Andrews would find.”

With a stiff expression, Mr Nostigon looked out of the hotel window. “If that is indeed the case, then I can only think of one place here on the grounds at the moment that would be comparable to a desert island.”

“And which one?” the Second Investigator asked.

“Only one building complex is completely disconnected from the fair—the Convention Centre. The entire area is shut down this week—no events, no controls, no camera surveillance.”

“A perfect ‘island’ indeed, away from all the hustle and bustle,” Pete noted.

Sighing, Mr Nostigon stroked his temple. “The only question that remains is where on this vast island Calbourn left his treasure trove of information...”

Suddenly, the Second Investigator had a flash of inspiration. “Maybe he’s already answered that question for us!” Hastily, he picked up the business card and pointed triumphantly to the second part of the code. “After all, the Roman numeral VII is written after ‘Gilligan’, and surely the rooms are numbered at the Convention Centre.”

“Yes, of course!” Mr Nostigon exclaimed. “But not only that, the Convention Centre is in Section G—‘G’ for ‘Gilligan’!”

“So we should pay a visit to Room G-7 right away!” Pete added excitedly.

It had taken some rhetorical effort before Jupiter and Bob finally convinced the upset *Heroes* actors that they hadn’t come to eavesdrop, but merely to ask the Beastor actor a few questions about the raffle.

According to Free-Man’s grumpy reply, however, Chris Roth had already retired to his hotel room and would certainly not be receiving any more visitors. Besides, he wouldn’t be allowed to share details about the event the next day anyway. So after a few last apologetic words, the two boys had said their goodbyes and dived back into the gradually lightening hustle and bustle of the fair.

“Gee whiz—that was a real let-off!” Bob exclaimed, when they had moved far enough away. “Free-Man’s accusations were more than clear after all. The real culprit is Skulldor! So Beastor’s hair on Calbourn’s jacket was pure coincidence, probably from a harmless encounter like mine.”

“That is indeed what it looks like,” Jupe admitted, while dodging an upright-walking version of Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. “At the very least, the conversation of which we have heard has been highly suspect. When we reconcile the new findings with our previous theories, the picture that emerges is that Mr Calbourn is on the trail of a dark secret about *Heroes* that is extraordinarily explosive, but for reasons as yet unknown, does not concern Free-Man or Reela.”

“Maybe because they’ve stayed out of the affair,” Bob surmised. “Just about all the other performers are in on it though, according to Quorko, including himself. If this came out, there’d be a huge scandal.”

“And thus an incalculable risk to the multi-million dollar launch of the *Heroes* action figures,” the First Investigator added. “Only one, however, was manifestly willing to go over ‘dead bodies’ to avert Calbourn’s approaching revelation.”

Bob nodded grimly. “Skulldor, the Dark Lord of the Underworld, and he was apparently assisted by that pale ghost woman. Well, that fits...” Hesitantly, he looked at his friend.

“Now what? Shouldn’t we inform Mr Nostigon? After all, the culprit is as good as identified!”

“We will of course inform him and Pete about the new developments,” Jupiter replied and pulled out his mobile phone. “However, we shouldn’t be under the misapprehension that this case has already been solved. After all, the statements we heard are anything but watertight evidence especially since it is not yet clear whether Skulldor was really the sole perpetrator or only an instrument.”

“You mean he was acting for someone else?” asked Bob.

“Given the economic magnitudes at stake here, we cannot leave any stones unturned. There’s a reason names from the ‘upper echelon’ are on our suspect list—in particular, Lawrence Taggart and Mason Wachinski.”

“The corporate head of Fun Fellows and the inventor of *Heroes*,” Bob added as he convulsively tried to ignore a dismayingly bad, yet all the louder, hip-hop version of *O Come All Ye Faithful*. “... And you think one of them might have put Skulldor up to it?”

“At the very least, there’s enough at stake for both of them to warrant such an initial suspicion. Experience shows that such gentlemen do not like to get their own hands dirty—”

“—Instead have subordinates do it,” Bob finished the sentence. “Okay, I see. Now how do you want us to proceed?”

Again, the First Investigator pulled out the fair brochure. “There’s a Christmas party hosted by Fun Fellows starting at ten o’clock at the Starlight Bar. I would imagine that Taggart, Wachinski, and the toy inventor Fillmore will also be attending.”

While Jupiter now reached for his mobile phone to inform Pete about the serious suspicion against Skulldor, Bob pulled his ID card out of his trouser pocket with a determined smile.

“And with any luck, two certain members of the security staff at this party will pick up a hot piece of info or two...”

14 Hours Left

23rd December, 10 pm.

After Jupiter's spectacular news about Skulldor, Mr Nostigon and Pete had been even more eager to finally learn Calbourn's secret. The way to the Convention Centre, which required crossing a snow-covered park, had taken the two of them much longer than planned. The massive crowd at the park had prevented them from quickly moving across.

Arriving at the unused building complex, the security chief had soon made an observation of the area with a routine glance. He had concluded that there should be no problem for Mr Calbourn to get to this place.

Since the lighting in this area was largely switched off, Nostigon had to resort to the small flashlight he carried on his belt.

Room G-7, located soon after, had been a bitter disappointment, however. It was a storeroom, and even after the most intensive examination of the janitorial equipment there, not the slightest hint of any hidden information had been found.

"I don't believe it," Pete growled, annoyed, as he reconnected the hose of a large-capacity vacuum cleaner he had just checked. "The number was perfectly clear! Then why can't we find anything?"

Suddenly Mr Nostigon faltered. "Maybe because we're looking in the wrong place..." Hastily, he turned to the Second Investigator. "Hand me that business card, will you?"

After a quick glance at the card, a glimmer of hope flitted across the security chief's face. "It's possible we're just poking around in a fog... perhaps it is not Room G-7 that we should be at because if you read each of the three Roman numerals by itself, that makes five, one, and one. So that could be—"

"... Room G-511!" exclaimed Pete euphorically. "Let's get up to the fifth floor!"

Since the lifts were not in operation, they were once again left with only the stairwell. For the extremely athletic Second Investigator, this physical challenge was no more than a light training session, while the security chief was noticeably panting from the third floor onwards. With an amused smile, Pete had to think of Jupiter. His seventh sense had apparently persuaded him to go on a tour with Bob, since Mr Nostigon seemed to magically come up against steep stairs.

Up on the fifth floor, it took them a while to find Room G-511 in a small side corridor. It seemed the entire floor was about to undergo a major renovation, as the mostly opened rooms had been largely cleared out and the floors covered with large tarps.

Pete's investigative instincts rejoiced. Up here it would have been easy for Mr Calbourn to find a suitable hiding place among all the plastic. In fact, Room G-511 had a sea of tarpaulins, under which were the outlines of several cabinets.

Immediately Mr Nostigon and the Second Investigator began a systematic search of the drawers. After a seemingly endless task of opening and closing them, Pete finally found what he was looking for. In the bottom drawer of the last cabinet lay a slim white envelope.

"This has to be it!" he shouted excitedly, but just as the security chief rushed over, his mobile phone rang. He saw on the display that it was the security office.

Without hesitation, he activated the hands-free function so that Pete could listen in.

“Yes, Nostigon here.”

On the other end, a nasal male voice spoke up. “Sir, we’ve managed to reconstruct some of the camera footage in question.”

“Splendid!” Mr Nostigon exclaimed, smiling, “and what came of it?”

“Well, let’s put it this way...” the man said, “I can’t for the life of me understand your request earlier.”

Nostigon narrowed his eyes in irritation. “What do you mean?”

There was an underlying sharpness in the man’s voice now. “I thought you had enquired whether anyone but Mr Calbourn had entered Room D-609 between noon and 2:55 pm.”

“Yes, exactly,” the security chief replied. “A discreet search should be initiated immediately for the person in question.”

The next sentence hit Nostigon and Pete like a hammer blow.

“Sir, shortly after Mr Calbourn entered his room at 2:05 pm, the only other person who went into the same room, but left in a hurry a few minutes later... was you!”

Thanks to their ID cards, Jupiter and Bob had gained access to the Fun Fellows party without any problems and without age checks.

The Starlight Bar was already well filled at this point and bristling with glittering Christmas decorations. Now, as the lanky DJ with the sprawling plastic reindeer antlers on his head started playing the evergreen *Let It Snow!* white confetti began to trickle from the ceiling to the surprised laughter of the guests. A little apart, various delicacies were artfully arranged on a long buffet table, which the two hungry investigators gratefully feasted on.

They then began their planned eavesdropping, which proved delightfully easy given the name tags the guests wore. While Jupiter placed himself near the Fun Fellows boss Taggart, Bob took a seat near Mason Wachinski, who was also present. The result, however, which they exchanged with each other after three quarters of an hour had elapsed, was not very fruitful.

“That’s where they always say alcohol loosens the tongue,” grumbled the First Investigator, eyeing a stately eggnog glass that the balding corporate executive had just raised to the health of his guests. “But all the big boss rambles on is petty small talk... blah, blah, blah... and as for our toy tinkerer Mr Fillmore...” He pointed to a gaunt man with a tangled mop of hair who stood smiling sheepishly right next to Taggart, clutching his cramped hands around a notepad, “... that seems to be where Mr Nostigon’s instincts prove absolutely spot-on. The guy is as excited about tomorrow’s gala as a little schoolboy before a maths test. He’s now supposed to give the speech instead of Mr Calbourn and has had the boss dictate a few sentences for it. This situation has caught the poor chap completely off guard—that’s for sure.”

“So we haven’t made any headway as far as the mastermind is concerned,” Bob observed, “because Wachinski’s no better...” Annoyed, he looked over at a stocky man in his mid-sixties with shoulder-length, jet-black hair and an unkempt three-day beard who was lounging on a leather couch with three giggling young women. “This guy obviously has nothing but groupies on his mind.”

Jupiter grinned sarcastically. “That guy could easily be their grandfather. I wonder if those ladies would be as excited about him if he wasn’t a TV celebrity but a brick layer—”

He didn’t get any further than that, because while the loudspeakers were playing *Santa Baby*, a brunette young woman suddenly wrapped her arms around the startled First Investigator and gave him a passionate kiss.

13 Hours Left

23rd December, 11 pm.

For a brief moment, Mr Nostigon and Pete were simply speechless. Then the security chief regained his composure.

“There must be some mistake in your footage. I didn’t get to the room until a little before three, and not a second earlier. Call Mr Barnes—he can confirm that.”

“Mr Barnes from Maintenance?” the man from the security office replied in surprise, audibly operating a computer keyboard. “There seems to be some misunderstanding. Frederic Barnes had been on Christmas leave two days ago.”

“This... can’t be happening,” Pete breathed, aghast.

Mr Nostigon shook his head falteringly. He just couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “On leave? But Barnes was still at work this afternoon! He was the one who contacted the security office about Room D-609!”

“That is incorrect, sir,” the man objected coolly. “According to the system, it was you who first reported the incident to the security office.” Again, the clatter of the keyboard could be heard. “The data from the corridor checkpoint in Section D also confirms this timeline—at 2:08 pm you passed through the checkpoint for the first time, and came back out after a few minutes. Then, at 2:55 pm, you returned and subsequently called for emergency medical services.”

“That’s not true—why don’t you question the staff at the checkpoint!” snapped the usually level-headed security chief. “The system is obviously going haywire! Where is Catelyn, anyway? I want to speak to my assistant right now!”

“Miss McBride is currently not in the office and our system is working fine, sir,” came the emotionless reply. “I will be happy to show you the recordings in question. To do that, it would be appropriate for you to return to the security office right now to clarify the matter.”

Nostigon’s eyelids began to flutter. “I... don’t understand.”

“In addition, we’d be particularly interested to know why you were carrying a syringe when you first left Mr Calbourn’s room.”

Now it was Pete who couldn’t hold on any longer. “A what?”

The voice was as cutting as a razor blade now. “Mr Nostigon, given the disconcerting circumstances of this incident and the still highly critical state of Mr Calbourn’s health, we feel compelled to classify you as a suspect.”

As if in a trance, the security chief lowered his mobile phone. With a disturbed look, he turned to Pete, who was still clutching the envelope.

Without really thinking about it, the Second Investigator opened it and pulled out a black USB drive with a Post-It sticker attached to it. Pete’s pulse seemed to stop for a brief moment as he read the word written on it: ‘RUN!’

When Nostigon also perceived this unmistakable instruction, he instinctively whirled around to the window and froze. Quickly the Second Investigator stepped beside him.

In the dim glow of the car park lighting, four tall, brawny men in dark suits were visible, walking at high speed towards the Convention Centre. The leading man just then raised his head and stared upwards.

A veritable jolt of electricity seemed to twitch through Mr Nostigon's body. "Come on—we've got to get out of here!"

Jupiter made a face as if he had just been ordered to leave his brains in the cloakroom. Stiff as an ironing board, he stood there and tried to manage a halfway functional sentence of indignation, but all that came out was: "W-what?"

The decidedly attractive twenty-something woman pointed upwards with a wink. "Right place at the right time, sweetie."

Completely perplexed, the First Investigator turned his gaze to the ceiling—from which hung a magnificent sprig of mistletoe. Even Bob, to whom the whole action had seemed as unreal as it had to Juve, now saw the light. After all, it was a common Christmas custom to kiss each other when they met under mistletoe.

With a wide smile, the young woman tilted her head. "Now that we've already made out, we should introduce ourselves, right? I'm Jessalyn Wyngard, Publicity Department."

Gradually, the First Investigator's powers of concentration returned. "Uh... Jupiter Jones, Security Department... and this is my colleague Bob Andrews." Pointing to his now broadly grinning friend, he added with a soft hiss: "... Who foolishly failed to point out the darn green stuff above my noggin."

"Aha!" The brunette raised her eyebrows in surprise. "So young and already on the security team?"

"We're older than we look," Bob replied cheerfully, but quickly changed the subject so as not to jeopardize their cover. "Well, 'publicity' sounds exciting. Are you in on the big surprise tomorrow?"

"Well, that's what I'm talking about." With a mischievous twinkle in her eye, Jessalyn reached into her elegant handbag and pulled out two metal badges with the *Heroes* logo and handed them to the boys. "Officially, these aren't given out until the gala, but I'll make an exception for you guys."

Jupiter and Bob chatted a bit more with the friendly publicity manager until she excused herself to greet an arriving 'important marketing partner'. The two investigators then returned to their listening positions.

Another uneventful three quarters of an hour later, a loud rumble suddenly sounded. A visibly drunk Santa Claus stormed to the middle of the bar, climbed onto a table and shouted at the top of his voice: "Down with the space monsters! Long live the real Christmas!"

12 Hours Left

24th December, 12 am.

In their flight from the unknown pursuers, just about everything that could go wrong had gone wrong.

First, Pete and Mr Nostigon had sneaked down to the third floor as quickly and inconspicuously as possible. Hiding in a room near the stairwell, they waited silently until the men had stormed to the higher floors.

Just as the four security guards had passed the third floor, a shrill beep had sounded on the security chief's mobile phone, indicating a new message from the security office. Immediately the pursuers had set off on their trail and a wild race through the countless office corridors of the Convention Centre had begun. Since the Second Investigator, unlike Mr Nostigon, had no flashlight with him, he had been entirely dependent on the security chief's source of light.

Just as they had managed to gain a little more distance from their pursuers, Pete suddenly tripped over a pile of tarpaulins just before a corner. The few seconds of his tumbling around had been enough to lose sight of Nostigon's flashlight.

Pete did not dare to call out for fear of alerting the pursuers. With bated breath and a wildly pounding heart, he listened... but the rapidly receding footsteps faded too quickly for him to determine their direction.

It was now pitch dark around the Second Investigator, for, in contrast to the outer corridors with their window fronts, which were dimly lighted by moonlight, not the slightest glimmer of light penetrated into these inner corridors.

He listened anxiously into the impenetrable darkness, but there was only dead silence. As startling as this realization was, there was no longer any doubt—Pete had been separated from the security chief without him noticing. Now the Second Investigator found himself alone somewhere in the dark maze of an empty office building, chased by several unknown pursuers. The most important thing now was not to panic, but to keep a cool head.

Pete took two deep breaths and exhaled, when suddenly all the overhead lights flared up. Blinded by the bright wave of light, he had to close his eyes for a moment.

When he blinked and opened it again, a shocked groan escaped his throat. Stumbling, he backed away from the incomprehensible sight. In his first moment of shock, he hoped that his overwrought senses were playing an evil trick on him after the abrupt change from complete darkness to glaring brightness, but they were not.

At the other end of the corridor, about twenty metres from him, standing bolt upright and grinning icily was the Ivory Woman! In a bizarre posture reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, she stretched a misshapen object high above her head by her outstretched right arm and stared at Pete.

All at once, the light in the corridor began to flicker. At regular intervals it went out, only to light up again immediately. Horrified, the Second Investigator registered how the pale woman now moved towards him disturbingly fast and with strange prancing steps. The constant flashes of light, however, made it seem not like a fluid movement, but unnaturally

choppy, as if the Ivory Woman was darting toward him in the darkness and remaining motionless in the brightness.

A shrieking voice inside Pete bellowed at him to turn and flee instantly, but his feet seemed glued to the floor. As if mesmerized, he stared at the scrawny figure and now realized, aghast, that the strange object she was holding in her right hand was a Christmas bell with ribbons.

Suddenly, like a mocking allusion to the woman's snow-white complexion, Pete thought he heard Bing Crosby's Christmas hit *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas* in the distance.

In a sickening gesture of mockery, the woman now twisted her thin lips into a beckoning kissing mouth and let out rhythmic smacking sounds. However, the Second Investigator was much more horrified when the woman waved her left hand back and forth elatedly at waist level. Between her bony fingers flashed a long hypodermic needle!

That seemed to flip a switch in Pete's head. Panicked, he whirled around and ran towards the opposite end of the corridor to get away as far as possible. Amidst a twitching flurry of lights, a hideous, shrill giggle sounded behind him.

Immediately Jupiter and Bob had rushed to the still ranting Santa Claus. With calm but insistent words, they had tried to explain to him that it could not possibly be in the spirit of the festival of love to ruin a peaceful Christmas party. Indeed, after a while, the white-bearded man had finally relented and had staggered back down from the table.

After the boys had escorted him outside, they convinced him with a lot of coaxing that it would be best to get a good night's sleep first.

Relieved, they returned to the Starlight Bar afterwards. Appreciative hand clapping from the guests as well as an amazingly original version of the song *Feliz Navidad* welcomed them—together with a smiling publicity manager.

"You really did a fabulous job, boys! An impressive display of responsiveness and diplomatic skill. Well done! Your boss, the provincial sheriff, can really be proud of you."

"Thank you very much," the First Investigator replied, exhausted. "That was indeed a hard piece of work."

Still, Jupiter didn't think of pausing, on the contrary. He took a step aside and pulled out his mobile phone. He was annoyed that Pete had not contacted him for so long. Therefore, he sent him a text message to ask how far the investigation had progressed.

Beside him, Bob looked towards the door with a wry grin. "Well, now the only question left is whether it's a bad omen to kick Santa Claus out from a Christmas party..."

11 Hours Left

24th December, 1 am.

Pete had lost all sense of time. Thanks to his speed, he had managed to escape the terrible Ivory Woman in the flickering light, but only a few moments later, deep darkness had taken over the inner wing of the Convention Centre again.

Forced to be unnervingly slow, Pete tried to make his way as quietly as possible to one of the moonlit outer corridors. Only now did it occur to him that he had completely forgotten his mobile phone in all the excitement. He absolutely had to inform his friends about the unbelievable events!

Hastily, he pulled out his mobile phone and realized that Jupiter had sent him a text message asking how things were going. Before Pete could dial the number of the First Investigator, a hand suddenly clasped his shoulder with an iron grip.

“Don’t shout—it’s me,” Mr Nostigon hissed, pulling Pete through a door into a slightly brighter corridor with a window.

“Sir! How did you know it was me?” asked Pete with boundless relief.

“If I couldn’t tell your footsteps from one of those gorillas, I’d have to seriously worry about my perception.”

The Second Investigator wiped his sweaty brow. “Those gorillas aren’t alone. The pale woman showed up again and tried to give me a shot! What is really going on?”

“I have no idea yet, but now at the latest, it is finally clear that there was an attack on Mr Calbourn... and someone is doing everything they can to pin it on me! Apparently I’ve been targeted since I started the investigation.”

Mr Nostigon turned his head and listened in all directions, but there was complete silence in the wing. “Okay, listen—if we can make it to the basement area, we can return to the Grand Lodge via a supply tunnel. Let’s hope those guys don’t know that one. Then, at the hotel, we’ll find shelter and discuss how to proceed.” There was a flicker in his eyes. “And above all, we must find out what’s on that USB drive!”

Jupiter and Bob had meanwhile taken up their listening positions for the third time, hoping to pick up more relevant information. Indeed, Bob seemed to be lucky this time, because the talkative series creator Wachinski had just spread out a most interesting topic in front of his female listeners.

“Nothing’s in the bag yet, of course,” he explained with a conspiratorial tone and audibly heavier tongue, “but if all this toy nonsense gets off to a great start, chances are my *Heroes* will make a fat comeback on the big screen.”

Partly admiring, partly baffled cackling set in. A blonde lady leaned forward and batted her false eyelashes expressively. “You mean... a movie?”

“You bet I mean it, baby,” Wachinski confirmed in a hushed voice, pointing unobtrusively at a mid-thirty-something man with a crew cut and a dark blue double-breasted suit sitting a little off to the side at the bar counter. “That moustachioed milksop over there is

Floyd Keathley, assistant general manager of Delta Pictures in Los Angeles. They've had their wires hot in the background for a long time. All I can say is: 'The Legend Returns'..."

"Really?" remarked an equally visibly buzzed redhead. "With all the stars from back then?"

"The entire cast," Wachinski confirmed with a grin. "The comeback of old heroes is booming in Hollywood right now. We're going to jump on that bandwagon nicely—with me as executive producer."

"Awesome!" the blonde spoke up again. "I'll keep my fingers crossed that everything works out! With such a huge thing, there are certainly some hurdles to overcome."

Now Wachinski's eyes narrowed, and his voice took on a sharper tone. "Oh, yes... but the most stubborn problem is now out of the way..."

Bob, listening intently, hoped to learn more details, but suddenly he noticed that a skeletal-faced figure had built up right next to him, staring at him with a scowl.

"Well, if that's not an interesting coincidence..."

10 Hours Left

24th December, 2 am.

Agonizingly slowly, the security chief and Pete had finally managed to reach the basement of the Convention Centre unnoticed. Because of the constant danger of being heard by their pursuers, a call to Jupiter had of course been out of the question.

Through a long supply tunnel, in which there were fortunately no cameras, but unfortunately also no network reception, they had then reached the storage rooms below the kitchen of the Grand Lodge. There they had retreated to an alcove behind a massive mountain of large cardboard boxes. Stunned, Nostigon now looked at the display on his mobile phone.

“Any new scares?” asked Pete as he waited impatiently for his own mobile phone to show reception again.

“You could say that.” The security chief snorted contemptuously. “The hunt for me is officially on now. Word just went out over the security news channel that I’m urgently wanted as a suspect in the Calbourn case... and the attached screenshot of the video footage is really most impressive...”

He held the phone out to Pete, who looked incredulously at the image, which clearly showed Mr Nostigon leaving Room D-609. The digital time display was 2:11 pm and there was indeed a syringe in the security chief’s right hand.

“Madness...” Pete gasped. “I thought such perfect image manipulations only existed in the movies.”

“Whoever is targeting me must have incredible technical capabilities,” Mr Nostigon noted.

“... And he has access to the security system. It might even be someone on your team—possibly that unpleasant guy with the nasal voice?”

Nostigon sighed. “I can’t rule it out. I don’t know many details about the staff members, and conversely, no one knows much about me.”

“In other words, there is no person here who would stand up for you either,” concluded the Second Investigator.

“Exactly. No one here really knows me well enough to vouch for my innocence.”

With a strained expression, Pete rubbed his aching temples. “Even Jupiter, Bob and I couldn’t do anything about it. No one would believe the testimony of three unknown boys if there was video evidence like that.”

“No relief on any front...” Dismayed, Nostigon shook his head.

Uncertainly, the Second Investigator looked at him. “Do you think we should contact the police now?”

“No,” the security chief replied in a firm voice. “Everything is still going on behind the scenes without affecting the fair and its guests. A police operation, even more so with the keyword ‘murder attempt’, would immediately turn all media spotlights on GameFame and cause a huge furore.”

“... With unforeseeable consequences for the conclusion of the fair and for your own career,” Pete added, raising his mobile phone, which by now also indicated reception. “So we’ll have to solve the case on our own. High time to inform Jupiter and Bob.”

This time it had been even more complicated for the two investigators to convince Skulldor of the honest motives for their presence. Even the if ID cards shown had had only a temporary effect. Finally Jessalyn had interfered and vehemently pointed out that the two teenage security guards were doing an excellent job and certainly didn't want to spy on anyone.

Now that it was finally futile to continue undercover at the party after all the attention, the boys retreated to an empty bar table to discuss what they had learned so far to the strains of *Last Christmas*. Just as Bob was reporting Mr Wachinski's highly suspicious remark about the elimination of a persistent problem, Jupiter's mobile phone rang.

During the conversation that followed, the First Investigator's eyes grew larger and larger. When he hung up, it was plain to see how violently his thoughts had been thrown into turmoil. "You wouldn't believe what Pete just told me..."

9 Hours Left

24th December, 3 am.

During the extensive conversation with Jupiter, in which Mr Nostigon had also intervened several times, the Second Investigator had only really become aware of the full extent of the inconceivable events.

“Man, my head is spinning...”

“No wonder...” the security chief replied, crossing his arms. “This whole thing can really drive you crazy. All the more important that we finally get to the bottom of it. From what Jupiter has told us, Mason Wachinski could very well be the mastermind.”

“At least he would have the perfect connections to set Skulldor on Mr Calbourn,” Pete noted. “If that is indeed the case, he must be very sure of himself. Otherwise, I don’t think he’d be celebrating in such a frenzied manner while you’re still at large.”

Nostigon nodded darkly. “True, but if he really is the villain, he’s guaranteed to have plenty of henchmen—further aided by my security team.” Frowning, he stroked his hair. “For that very reason, I suppose we can take Santa off our suspect list. He simply lacks the necessary connections to pull off such a huge stunt.”

“So we can eliminate the ‘hate’ motive as well,” added the Second Investigator, “which brings us back to our theory with the dark secret of *Heroes*, which is not to be revealed under any circumstances.”

“Anyway, thanks to your friends, we now know that a smooth launch of the toys is even more significant to Wachinski than we assumed.”

“Because a scandal could ruin his start in the big movie business,” Pete finished the thought, pulling the USB drive out of his pants pocket. “But to finally get to the truth, we desperately need a PC!”

“If I remember correctly, two floors above us the hotel staff lounge where there are free-access computers.” Frowning, Nostigon glanced at his watch. “With any luck there won’t be anything going on there at this hour... but for now we’ll wait to hear back from Jupiter and Bob. If those two manage to infiltrate the security office, we might learn where my security team thinks I am at the moment and how they plan to proceed against me.”

Yawning, the Second Investigator leaned against the barren concrete wall. “We could really use a little outside support right now...”

8 Hours Left

24th December, 4 am.

At the same time, Jupiter and Bob had had to deal with several unpleasant incidents involving drunken revellers and a security door that refused to open, along with a detour that was subsequently necessary.

Finally the boys had arrived at the security office and had actually managed to smuggle themselves in without any major difficulties. They had benefited from the fact that the staff hardly knew each other and their minds were completely elsewhere. If anything, only fleeting glances flitted across their ID cards.

There were currently about twenty-five people in the office space, which was decorated with Christmas garlands and plenty of fir greenery. The centre was a large computer counter with various monitors. The air literally crackled with tension.

With some reassurance, the two investigators noted that quite a bit of chaos had apparently broken out. Catelyn McBride, Mr Nostigon's assistant, seemed completely overwhelmed by the exceptional situation. She and a member of staff had just started an open argument about whether the police should be called in or not. To make the confusion of voices perfect, the beeping voices of the Chipmunks with their Christmas hit *Christmas Don't Be Late* were squawking from some radio.

In all the commotion, the boys managed to retreat to a corner of the security office where they pretended to probe data on the computer. In reality, they were listening intently to what was going on and at the same time trying to access the information system to get more details about what was going on in Room D-609.

Suddenly, however, a sharp grating voice cut through the commotion. "Is this a chicken coop or an operations centre?"

A wiry man in his late fifties with a prominent, weather-beaten face, black-grey hair and a well-cut suit had just entered the room. With firm steps, he walked to a conference table and with an energetic movement pushed aside a drinks tray, causing several papers lying around to whirl up. Then he pointed to the vacated space in the centre of the table. "This is where all the relevant information will end up from now on, and by relevant, I mean everything to do with this Nostigon—from his social security number to the name of his favourite cornflakes! And will someone please turn off that miserable music?"

Upset, Miss McBride strode up. "Who are you and where do you get off giving orders around here?"

Completely unimpressed, the person addressed turned. "Because that's my job, lady." He pulled an ID card from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "My name is Charlton Hogart—I've been in charge at this place for eight years, and now the management has invited me back to handle this pressing problem—and I have to settle it before noon." The man made a demonstrative sweeping motion. "So now, this is my party again. Anyone who wants to join me on the dance floor has to follow my music. Is that clear enough?"

Suddenly there was silence in the security office. No one wanted to mess with the highly assertive stand-in security chief. In fact, most of them seemed secretly happy that someone was finally taking the reins and issuing concrete instructions.

“Our mission is clear—capture Nostigon as quickly as possible with the least possible interference with ongoing operations. Since most of the guests will probably not appear on the scene before seven o’clock, we still have just under three hours to act largely unnoticed. All entrances and exits are to be hermetically sealed so that not even a silverfish could escape. So we’ll have to systematically search everywhere in each complex.”

Unexpectedly, Hogart approached a stocky man with a side parting and thick glasses and tapped him so hard on the shoulder that he winced in surprise. “All incoming reports from now on will go to Milhouse here, who will bundle them up for me and rank them in priority levels from ‘Urgent’ to ‘Anyone who bothers me with irrelevant filth gets kicked eight ways to Sunday.’ You got it? Let’s go then, we have a fugitive to catch!”

7 Hours Left

24th December, 5 am.

Even though it was a tremendous strain on their nerves, Pete and Mr Nostigon had no choice but to stay in their safe hiding place until Jupiter and Bob gave them the green light to move.

Fortunately, their fatigue was kept at bay by the tension, but after all this time without food, their growling stomachs were now making themselves heard all the more clearly. So they used the forced break to satisfy the worst of their hunger with a pack of doughnuts, of which there were whole stacks down here in the kitchen store.

After what felt like an eternity, the vibration of Pete's mobile phone, now set to silent, finally indicated that a call was coming in. In a muffled voice, Jupe informed him that he and Bob had managed to take up position inconspicuously at the security office. Since the security guards were currently a safe distance from Pete's location, the First Investigator advised him to move to an upper floor as quickly as possible.

Hastily, Pete and the security chief made their way. In fact, they managed to get to the hotel staff lounge which was fortunately deserted and monitored by only one camera that was easily bypassed thanks to Nostigon's knowledge. Hastily, the Second Investigator plugged the USB drive into the corresponding port of a computer and clicked on the displayed icon.

"Only one folder," Mr Nostigon noted, frowning, "titled 'JW-Supplements'."

Tensely, Pete directed the cursor to the folder icon. "Whatever it is—now we'll finally find out what secret Mr Calbourn has stumbled upon..."

In the meantime, Jupiter had come to the conclusion that he had to make a change in strategy. Simply hanging around at the security office was not enough for him. At the risk of blowing his cover, he was going to try to put a grain of doubt into the lead hound's sleuthing. As he saw it, he had a fifty-fifty chance with Mr Hogart. Either the man was also a participant in the great *Heroes* conspiracy, or he had actually been brought in after the crisis had erupted and had nothing to do with all that had happened.

Jupiter knew he was playing for high stakes, but he was willing to take that risk to turn the tide in their favour. If he failed in his push, there was always Bob to continue the watching the action. After conferring briefly with his friend, the First Investigator approached the stand-in security chief in apparent embarrassment.

"Uh... sir, I noticed something that might be important."

With a disdainful look, Hogart eyed the First Investigator and the ID card, but did not utter a word about his young age. "Out with it, then."

"Well, it's about the sequence of events. If Mr Nostigon really had made an attempt on Mr Calbourn's life, why would he subsequently request corridor camera footage that clearly establishes him as the perpetrator? That would be completely idiotic. And why was the footage initially unavailable and later only partially reconstructed, namely at the very crucial moments of Nostigon's arrival and departure from Mr Calbourn's room?"

Jupiter hesitated and watched the man's expression, but could see neither agreement nor doubt in it. He interpreted this as an invitation to continue.

“Besides, surely Mr Nostigon, as security chief, would be clever enough not to be photographed with his syringe in plain view by his own cameras. Just as well he could have waved a sign saying ‘I did it! Arrest me please!’ Not to mention the inconsistencies over the cleaner Barnes. You see, I have since heard several reliable statements to the effect that this man is not on leave yesterday, but was working in Section D in the afternoon.” That wasn’t a lie, because he himself, Pete and Bob would actually be able to testify to that.

Still no movement was visible in the face of the wiry man. Silently, Hogart fixed his eyes on the First Investigator for several seconds, as if he wanted to see deep inside him with X-ray vision.

The following movement was so fast that Jupiter did not notice the hand of the stand-in security chief until it had already firmly gripped his shoulder and a broad grin settled over Hogart’s face.

6 Hours Left

24th December, 6 am.

With a mixture of perplexity and steadily growing nervousness, Pete and Mr Nostigon had skimmed page after page of the voluminous data material without being able to draw any conclusions from it.

“Nothing but columns of figures, schematics, and some kind of graphs that nobody can figure out!” the Second Investigator hissed angrily.

“At least we can’t,” Mr Nostigon confirmed. “If I had to guess, I’d say it has something to do with the microchipping of the *Heroes* action figures, but I haven’t the faintest clue what... and certainly not whether there’s anything sensational or scandalous about it.”

“We’re definitely not getting anywhere here on our own,” Pete agreed. “Maybe we should—”

But that was as far as he got, for at that moment, a surprised male voice sounded from the background.

“Mr Nostigon?”

Jupiter had been convinced that Hogart would consider him Nostigon’s accomplice and place him under arrest, instead, the stand-in security chief had let out a harsh laugh and announced: “Sharp-eyed and proactive—I commend that!” Then he had leaned closer to the First Investigator and lowered his voice. “But between us pastor’s daughters—you’re never, ever a real security guard, are you?”

“You have a point, sir...” After a moment’s hesitation, Jupiter had finally decided to go all out. He pulled out the business card of The Three Investigators and handed it to the visibly surprised Mr Hogart. The card said:



Afterwards, of course, there had been many questions to be settled, from the presence of the boys and their relationship with Mr Nostigon to the various inconsistencies in the Calbourn case.

After Jupiter finished, Hogart scratched his stubbly chin thoughtfully. “Hmm... A large-scale intrigue against Nostigon does seem rather adventurous, and the fact that he flees instead of turning himself in does not make him any less suspicious. My mission, therefore, is

and remains to apprehend this man.” He paused for a moment. “So I will neither cover nor assist him, is that clear?”

“Perfectly clear, sir.” Though it wasn’t overtly stated, the First Investigator immediately understood that Hogart had just offered him some sort of silent pact. The stand-in security chief would continue the hunt, but would not prevent the boys from helping Nostigon prove his innocence. This was also why Hogart had not enquired all this time if Jupiter knew Nostigon’s whereabouts. He would not ask that question and the First Investigator would not have to lie.

Frowning, Mr Hogart looked at him. “I must admit, however, that some aspects you mentioned are most curious and should be examined in detail.”

“My colleague Bob and I are already working on it,” Jupiter admitted. “Since it cannot be ruled out that a security employee is also involved in the case, we are investigating without an official request.”

Hogart nodded. “Okay, then this will continue to be a covert investigation for now. If anyone gives you any guff, you can refer them to me and I’ll handle it.”

A relieved smile flitted across the First Investigator’s face. “I’ll be happy to get back to you on that, sir.”

5 Hours Left

24th December, 7 am.

The sudden appearance of Santa Claus had initially frightened the Second Investigator and Mr Nostigon. However, it had quickly become clear that the no less surprised Santa Claus was by no means one of the pursuers. He had dutifully slept off his drunkenness and had only come to the staff lounge to write a few e-mails before the fair began.

At the sight of Santa Claus already dressed up in full costume, the security chief and Pete had simultaneously come up with a brilliant idea. At their request, the irritated Santa had actually agreed to fetch his spare costume for Mr Nostigon to disguise himself.

After consulting by phone, Pete and Mr Nostigon, now as Santa Claus, had then left for their next destination—Room 124 on the same floor. This unoccupied hotel room had been given to them by Bob after a check of the occupancy list. Thanks to the security chief's master access card, it had again been no problem to gain entry. In these protected but cameraless four walls, they would be safe from their pursuers for the time being.

Since Pete and Nostigon couldn't figure out the data on the USB drive, Jupe decided to go to Room 124 as well. The tech-savvy First Investigator was eager to see Calbourn's mysterious data for himself.

After informing Bob, Jupiter slipped a slim laptop under his sweater at an opportune moment. He knew that Mr Nostigon could access the laptop with a master password. Then, muttering to himself that he needed to take a break, he left the security office. In the meantime, Bob would continue to hold position here, continuing his observation of the actions and the routes of the security guards.

Ten minutes later, as arranged, the First Investigator knocked tentatively three times on the door of Room 124 and a deeply relieved Pete opened it.

"I've rarely been so glad to see you, Jupe."

"The feeling is mutual," Jupiter replied with an exhausted smile, nodding to the still-disguised Mr Nostigon as well. "Red suits you admirably, sir."

"Thank you for the compliment," the security chief replied, a smile now flitting across his tense features as well.

After a quick breath, Jupiter walked purposefully over to a small desk on which the USB drive was already lying ready, took out the laptop and had Mr Nostigon give him the master password. While he began to carefully scan the data, Mr Nostigon positioned himself at the side of the window and kept an eye on the lantern-lit forecourt of the Grand Lodge.

Sighing softly, Pete let himself sink into a comfortable armchair. Only now, in the relative safety of the hotel room did some of the tremendous tension fall away from him.

Due to the incessant stress and adrenaline being released, the Second Investigator hadn't really noticed that they had been awake continuously for almost 24 hours by now. All the more hopeless was his struggle against his increasingly heavy eyelids. Eventually he fell into a fitful half-sleep, filled with jumbled snatches of dreams involving monstrous beast-men, juggling snowmen and living skeletons. Worst of all, however, was the ghastly pale woman who chased him through a maze of endless corridors, her lips twisted into a blood-red kissing mouth from which two pointed ivory teeth protruded...

A sudden rumbling made him startle abruptly. Dawn had set in by now and bathed the hotel room in reddish-purple light. Dazed, the Second Investigator looked over at Jupiter, who had just jumped up from his chair. In his right hand he held his mobile phone.

“That was Bob,” he shouted in high excitement. “There’s a group of security guards coming here at high speed!”

4 Hours Left

24th December, 8 am.

“I don’t believe it!” gasped Mr Nostigon. “They’d lost track of us all night—how did they find us now?”

“Through me...” The realization had jolted Juve like a pin prick. Hectically, he began to scan his clothes from top to bottom. “I am the only newcomer here. After all, we already suspected that our opponents had infiltrated a technically brilliant spy into the security office. This unknown person must have secretly slipped me a mini-transmitter or something similar so that I would eventually lead the pursuers to you... and that’s exactly what I did!”

Excitedly, Pete waved his hands. “Then get rid of the damn thing, otherwise we’ll have to part with you again... but without you we’ll never find out what that data is!”

“Whatever you’re going to do, hurry up,” admonished Mr Nostigon, who had stepped back to the window. “I can see those chaps already. They’ll be here in two minutes at the most!”

“Okay, keep a close eye on these,” the First Investigator called out. “I’m going to try something. If it doesn’t work, I’ll take the lift and get caught far away from you!” With those words, he hastily removed his shoes, pants, and jacket.

“So what’s next?” asked Pete, confused. “Are you going to stomp on your clothes until the transmitter breaks?”

In response, Jupiter only hissed: “Laundry chute!” as he picked up his clothes and shoes from the floor. Only his wallet and mobile phone was tossed on the desk. Then he stormed to the door, peering around after it opened, and ran a little way down the corridor, where he had noticed an old-fashioned dirty laundry chute on the way in. With nervous hands, Jupiter opened the flap and tossed the bundle inside.

Breathing heavily, he then returned to the hotel room and looked expectantly over at Mr Nostigon. “Well?”

“They’ve actually stopped!” the security chief announced tensely. “One of them is looking at a small device and seems rather irritated.”

“So my plan worked then,” the First Investigator stated with a grim smile. “So there is indeed a transmitter fixed to my clothes, and now it tells those guys that we’re making a run to the basement at lightning speed.”

“Indeed—now they’re moving to the right towards the underground car park,” announced Mr Nostigon. “I couldn’t make much out of them, but at least a little more than I could a few hours ago. They’re definitely not part of my team.”

Pondering, Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “So an outside group—good to know...”

Pete nudged him on the shoulder in relief. “Anyway, that was a great reaction, Juve! But now we should call Bob and get him to find us a new room. Eventually those gorillas will figure out they’re not chasing us, but your clothes. Then when they put two and two together, they’ll come back to where they first located you—which is here.”

“You’re right,” Jupiter agreed. “While I think it unlikely that they are able to match the last trace to the exact room, we cannot take any chances.”

Fortunately, it didn't take long for Bob to find another free room on the next floor up. In order not to have to go out the door in his underpants, Jupiter put on a white terry cloth bathrobe hanging on the coat rack. Getting new clothes from his room seemed too risky in view of the long distance.

After everyone had scurried into Room 208, Mr Nostigon operated the door lock, breathing a sigh of relief. "Well here we go... new hideout, hopefully better luck..."

While the First Investigator sat back down at a desk and activated the laptop, Pete plopped down on the king-sized double bed, snorting in annoyance. "Oh man... I'd love to see those guys cursing and digging through a mountain of dirty laundry right now because they think we are hiding in it."

"In any case, they could have posted someone to watch the building from down there," Mr Nostigon replied, pointing sombrely out the window to the right of which he had repositioned himself.

Jupiter was already so absorbed in the complicated schematics and circuit diagrams that he had not even heard the last remark. Pete, on the other hand, stood up suspiciously and approached Mr Nostigon, keeping his guard up as well. After a brief glance at the still almost deserted, snow-covered forecourt, he faltered and an ice-cold shiver ran down his spine.

In the shelter of a fir tree lovingly decorated with numerous Christmas decorations, and standing upright and motionless like a scrawny scarecrow was the Ivory Woman—peering up at the hotel with a pair of binoculars.

3 Hours Left

24th December, 9 am.

With each passing minute, the circles under Jupiter's eyes had grown darker as he scrolled down page after page of the computer document.

The knuckles of his cramped fingers had turned white and beads of sweat shone on his forehead. He was aware that there was only a small window of time left to find out the secret before the grand gala began and after that, all the participants would scatter in all directions. The relentless countdown began in his mind's eye, like the bright red digits of a giant digital alarm clock.

"I'm... just not getting anywhere here," he muttered under his breath.

"Have you at least a rough idea of what this stuff is about?" asked Pete nervously, eyeing over for the umpteenth time at the pale woman who was watching the hotel like a hawk.

Groaning softly, Jupe closed his aching eyes for a moment. "The only really tangible clue is the multiple appearances of the word 'gaffer'."

"Gaffer?" asked Mr Nostigon. "An overseer, then?"

The First Investigator shook his head. "I don't think that's likely. I rather suspect it's a term from the movie world. After all, a 'gaffer' is the person responsible for the lights and other electrical equipment during the filming of a movie or TV programme."

"Hey, that might give us a connection to the series creator Wachinski!" Pete said excitedly.

"So possibly a member of his crew is on it then," Mr Nostigon suggested, "or someone from the future production team."

"Quite conceivable," Jupiter replied thoughtfully. "Unfortunately, that still doesn't give us any clue as to the specific events Mr Calbourn is on to." Annoyed, he tapped the monitor. "It seems to have something to do with the optical sensors on the *Heroes* action figures... and with some memory elements, but the details are just too technical for me. I won't be able to figure this out in such a short time..."

"Well, to hear that come out from you is quite a sensation," the Second Investigator replied. "Unfortunately, it comes at the worst possible time."

Energetically, Mr Nostigon fingered the hem of his now-removed Christmas hat. "Then we must try to call in an expert!"

"I had thought of that as well," Jupiter replied, "and I already know someone we could turn to— Doe Dungeon. He's a former client of ours, and is a professional computer programmer. He could certainly help us."

"True, he'd be ideal as a consultant," Pete agreed hopefully. "Can you log in here and send him the material?"

"Should be fine," the First Investigator replied, pointing to his friend's pocket. "Give me your room card. There's an Internet access password printed on the tag."

"If there really is a criminal computer genius at the security office, we'd better not use any of your room-assigned passwords," the security chief objected. "Instead, you're better off using a generic code that all security personnel use. That way our access will remain

completely unobtrusive.” With these words, he jotted down a nine-character combination of letters and numbers on a slip of paper and handed it to the First Investigator.

“Excellent,” Jupiter replied, turning back to Pete. “While I’m getting everything ready, why don’t you let Mr Dungeon know what we’re up to and get his e-mail address?”

“All right.” The Second Investigator nodded and pulled out his mobile phone.

The former client of The Three Investigators immediately agreed to examine the material. No sooner had Jupiter sent the data than Bob contacted him.

After the short conversation, Jupiter looked around seriously. “According to Bob, at the moment, there is a heated debate going on between security and the fair management. It’s about whether room checks should be carried out everywhere in the hotel.”

“This just keeps getting better,” Pete growled softly.

With a pained smile, Mr Nostigon leaned against the wall. “Oh man... who would have thought that a provincial egg like me would ever be the subject of a massive manhunt. I can’t believe it has led to this...”

For a few seconds, there was an awkward silence. Then something clicked in the First Investigator’s head.

“Wait a minute!” Flustered, he looked at the security chief. “Sir, have you told anyone here at the fair about your background, especially when you were in the East Coast?”

Mr Nostigon blinked. “Uh... no, no one. There was no need for that in the first place.”

Triumphantly, Jupiter folded his arms. “And yet someone obviously knows exactly about you...”

Impatiently Pete waved his hands. “Well, who would that be?”

“Jessalyn Wyngard!”

The uncomprehending expressions of his listeners reminded the First Investigator that the two of them could not have known about the encounter with Miss Wyngard in the bar.

“Oh, sorry,” he added quickly. “You weren’t there, after all. Miss Wyngard is the manager of the Publicity Department of Fun Fellows, whom Bob and I met at the party a few hours ago. While we were there, she referred to you, Mr Nostigon, as ‘the provincial sheriff’ when she remarked that you could be proud of such capable security team members as ourselves.”

“Really?” asked Pete in surprise. “And how did that happen? Did you guys do some heroic deeds we don’t know about yet?”

“That’s secondary now,” Jupe replied with a wave of his hand. “What is decisive is that this over-friendly lady has knowledge that she should not have at all...”

“... Unless she specifically found out about me,” Nostigon added, eyes narrowing in thought.

“Exactly,” the First Investigator confirmed, “and in depth, because by ‘provincial’ she definitely didn’t mean your current place of residence, San Francisco, but Fishingport where you came from.”

Puzzled, Pete shook his head. “But why would a publicity manager from Fun Fellows know such detailed information about the show’s security chief?”

“That is precisely the point,” Jupiter explained. “Such an action only makes sense if Miss Wyngard has a definite plan for it.”

“So you think she might have something to do with this whole conspiracy against me?” the security chief asked, puzzled, “but what motive should she have for it?”

“That’s the crucial question we—”

“The folder name!” the Second Investigator burst out abruptly, then he rushed to the still-open laptop and pointed frantically to the name Mr Calbourn had given the computer folder.

“Here, look at this—‘JW-Supplements’!”

“‘JW’—Jessalyn Wyngard!” exclaimed Mr Nostigon, puzzled. “Then behind the scandal Mr Calbourn was trying to uncover is... the publicity manager from Fun Fellows?”

“If it is indeed the case, we now most likely have identified the mastermind of the attack and thus the instigator of Skulldor and the Ivory Woman,” Jupiter added grimly. “That would be a fistful of surprise, though. A criminal mastermind hidden behind the façade of a dazzling smile...”

Pale eyed, Pete tilted his head with a grin. “Wow, it sounds like you have a teeny tiny crush on this lady.”

“Nonsense!” Jupiter defended vigorously. “She was just tremendously friendly and did —” At those words, the First Investigator’s features froze. Under the surprised looks of the other two, he reached for his mobile phone and called Bob. In order not to waste time with unnecessary explanations later, he activated the hands-free function so that Pete and Mr Nostigon could listen in.

“Hello, Bob—don’t ask any questions now, please, just take out the little badge Miss Wyngard gave you!”

“But... you got one yourself,” an audibly surprised Bob replied.

“Now just do as I asked!” hissed Jupiter, annoyed.

“Okay, okay, I’m on it...” A brief pause set in, during which hasty rustling could be heard. “So, here’s the thing—now what?”

“Break it open,” Jupiter replied.

“Uh... you want me to break it open? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, for goodness’ sake, just do it! But do it inconspicuously, and be careful while you’re doing it—there’s probably something in there.”

Surrendered, Bob sighed. “All right, I don’t have to get it. Now then, Operation Break-Badge is underway.”

Silence fell again for a moment, interrupted only by a soft crackle and crunch. Then Bob’s voice sounded again, this time even more irritated than before.

“There... is some kind of tiny computer chip in here. It almost looks like some kind of —”

“—Mini radio transmitter,” added the First Investigator angrily. “I thought so! The lady is really cunning...”

“But why—”

“Later!” interrupted Jupiter. “The important thing is that you get rid of that devil thing somehow. It would be best if you secretly slipped the chip to someone at the security office.”

“Well, I can try... if this thing is still working,” Bob replied.

“Try it anyway,” Jupe urged.

“Will do...” Bob agreed. “I’m sure you’ll have the time to explain it all to me some day.”

“Promise. So how are you guys doing decision-wise? Are the room checks going ahead?”

“That’s still up in the air. I’ll be in touch when it’s clear how things will proceed.”

“Okay, see you later then!”

“That’s really incredible,” Pete muttered in amazement. “So you had a prepared badge like that with you earlier!”

“That’s why the pursuers were able to pick up our trail when you came to us earlier,” Mr Nostigon added. “That Miss Wyngard is really going out of her way to get her hands on me.”

“Not only you, but Mr Calbourn’s material, of which the lady is unquestionably aware,” Jupe specified. “So the unknown group of security guards belongs to Miss Wyngard, and is

acting independently of the security office... and then there is the informer, whose infiltration into the security office was presumably also arranged by her.”

“Sounds logical,” Pete replied. “Ever since she caught wind that we didn’t fall for the heart attack and started our own investigations, she’s been determined to stop us by any means necessary.”

“Correct.” With a scowl, the First Investigator looked at the laptop screen. “And it all has to do with some strange data here that could very well point to what Jessalyn Wyngard is up to. Let’s hope Mr Dungeon gets back to us soon to clear up this most important mystery of all...”

In the meantime, the three had no choice but to wait for the programmer to call them back. The minutes seemed to stretch like tough chewing gum and leaden fatigue made their heads grow heavier and heavier... but just as the First Investigator’s chin sank to his chest, the three of them were startled by a heavy knock on the door.

2 Hours Left

24th December, 10 am.

“Bummer! What are we going to do?” hissed Pete excitedly, instinctively glancing out the window at the Christmas tree glittering in the morning light. The Ivory Woman was no longer there.

Hectically, Jupiter looked around. “If they catch us, it’s all over! We’ve got to find some way—”

An energetic whisper made him fall abruptly silent.

“Would you perhaps have the courtesy to let me in, or do I need to submit a written request for that?”

“Bob!” cried the Second Investigator in boundless relief, hurrying to the door and letting his friend in.

“Very kind...” the unexpected visitor grumbled before pausing in puzzlement at the sight of Jupiter. “Did you just get out of the bath?”

With a sarcastic expression, the First Investigator nodded. “Absolutely right, Bob. I found the relaxed atmosphere here perfect for a cosy bubble bath... and to top it off, I’m now going to march barefooted to the spa and get a soothing massage.”

“Then I’m coming with you!” admonished Pete with a wry grin.

To avoid further confusion, Mr Nostigon now jumped in. “To be precise, it was an emergency measure to remove the transmitter.” Questioningly he looked at Bob. “But tell me—why didn’t you call and let us know you were coming?”

Sighing, Bob lowered himself to the edge of the bed. “Because my mobile phone battery died, and every other phone at the security office was within earshot of someone, so I would have inevitably been overheard.”

“I see,” Jupiter replied. “Of course, under those circumstances, your observation post no longer made sense.”

“In case we get separated again, we need to be able to keep in touch,” Mr Nostigon stated, pulling a small device from his coat pocket and handing it to Bob. “Until we get through this, you can use my personal phone. I have my work phone with me.”

“Thank you, sir,” Bob replied with relief, and then looked back at Jupiter. “By the way, as you instructed, I secretly slipped the mini radio transmitter to a ‘colleague’ before I left. All our pursuers will be tracking a blond and burly IT specialist with a penchant for pepperoni pizza.” Disdainfully, he shook his head. “This whole thing is really unbelievable. So this devious wannabe beauty queen deliberately kissed you to throw us off our game and then bug us!”

In the moment of perplexed silence that followed, Pete’s jaw could be heard literally dropping. “She did... what to Juve?”

Contrite, Bob looked at the First Investigator, convulsively trying to suppress a grin. “I guess you hadn’t brought up that point yet... right?”

“That’s true,” grumbled Jupiter as his complexion abruptly resembled Santa’s costume. “Thanks to your exuberant urge to share, that knowledge gap has now been successfully filled!”

“So Jupe, what happened,” Pete continued to probe.

“Details are absolutely not relevant to the case now!” the First Investigator rebuffed, “but rest assured—that was a forced assault that I couldn’t possibly have fought off.”

Mr Nostigon smiled in amusement. “Sounds like some pretty intense tribulations you’ve had to deal with.”

Pete couldn’t get himself together again and muttered to himself in disbelief: “That’s really the icing on the cake! We have here a worthy bathrobe playboy smooching wildly with a beauty queen, but who came after me? A wrinkled creepy witch with Christmas bells!”

Tentatively, Mr Nostigon tried to steer the conversation back to the topic at hand. “Were you able to get any information before you left, Bob?”

“You bet—I’ll get to that in a minute,” replied Bob, whose relief at having escaped an impending telling-off was plain to see. “But the most important thing right away is we must be out of here in ten minutes at the latest. At the moment, all security guards are indeed being pulled together in order to start the room checks very soon.”

“Then it’s high time we folded our tents here,” the security chief agreed with a scowl.

Jupiter nodded. “Okay, before we leave, though, I’ll call Mr Dungeon and see what he’s been able to find out so far. If necessary, we’ll just have to go into the final duel with Jessalyn Wyngard with incomplete ammunition.”

Alarmed, Pete asked. “You want us to go face-to-face against that ruthless criminal?”

“Don’t worry—we’ll be adequately armed,” the First Investigator reassured him. “Before that, however, we must find out where the lady is at the moment.”

“I can be of help there,” Bob announced. “After the business with the bugged badge, I did a little check on Miss Wyngard. Currently she should be here at the hotel in a reserved conference room on the nineteenth floor. That’s where she’s discussing the final details for the presentation of *Heroes* with the show team.”

“Excellent work, Bob,” Jupe praised. “Sounds like a perfect setting for our own final show.”

“And as the room checks will hopefully be carried out nice and systematically from the bottom up, we still have a good chance of getting to the nineteenth floor unseen,” added Mr Nostigon, thirsty for action.

“Speaking of being unseen,” Bob took up the cue. “I also now know the means by which the perpetrators escaped from Mr Calbourn’s office.”

Pete looked up at him. “Well, now I’m curious...”

“Our mistake was that we searched the walls for a secret entrance, assuming that the escape route must lead to an adjoining room.”

“That assumption was, after all, quite justified from the standpoint of logical deduction,” Jupiter objected.

Bob grinned. “I’m not disputing that at all. However, there was one part of the room that we did not search.”

“Huh?” Pete blinked in irritation. The security chief couldn’t quite follow either, while a spark of realization flashed on Jupiter’s expression.

Bob made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “The solution to the mystery lies in the room below Room D-609. During my investigations, I was able to find that the architect of the building complex had a trap door built into the ceiling of Room D-509 on behalf of the building owner at the time. By means of a pull-out ladder, it was thus possible for ‘special’ guests to climb up to Room D-609 above via this hidden access.”

“Presumably for the purpose of enjoying intimate togetherness, which for obvious reasons should take place in secret,” Jupe concluded mockingly. Then he shook his head with

a sigh. “Well, that’s when we extensively checked every part of the walls without realizing that the escape route was right under our feet. Not exactly a feat of criminology...”

“Even the most brilliant investigator can miss a detail,” Mr Nostigon comforted him.

“Exactly,” Pete agreed. “That wavy line pattern of the carpet is ideal for covering up any grooves. Even with a careful search, we would have had a hard time finding the trap door.”

“It wouldn’t be a secret door otherwise,” Bob added with a wink. “By the way, Room D-509 was rented to a guy in the production management of Fun Fellows, but according to the computer system, he cancelled his attendance at the show on short notice. Now guess through whose office was this reservation made?”

There was a glint in Jupiter’s eyes. “I suppose I shall not succumb to a lapse of judgement this time if I am led to hypothesize that it is a lady with the initials ‘J’ and ‘W’.”

“Bingo!” Bob confirmed. “In the case of Room D-609, although the reservation was officially made through the GameFame press office, Miss Wyngard definitely had a hand in that too. Nothing about all these happenings was coincidental—every detail was precisely planned. For example, I found out that an interesting staff recommendation was made through Miss Wyngard’s office three days ago.”

“Namely?” asked Pete, catching his breath.

“It was about the job of an external consultant for the security concept for the gala,” Bob continued. “What makes it really exciting is that when I did more in-depth checks, I found that this person is the head of the engineering department at Fun Fellows.”

“What’s that chap’s name?” Mr Nostigon asked.

“Basil Gaffer,” Bob replied.

“Gaffer?” snapped the First Investigator. “Then that wasn’t a term from the movie world at all, but a person’s name!”

Puzzled, Bob looked at him.

“The word ‘gaffer’ appeared several times in the document found in Mr Calbourn’s USB drive,” Jupiter explained hastily. “At first I thought it might be a lighting technician from the crew or Wachinski’s future production team.”

“So it’s really an engineer from Fun Fellows that Miss Wyngard slipped into my security team as a mole,” added Mr Nostigon, puzzled. “I remember him vaguely. He was a perfectly inconspicuous guy—so quiet that you would not even realize he was around.”

“An inconspicuous shell with a criminal core—an ideal combination for covertly hacking into the security system and tampering with the evidence,” Bob noted. “Must be a real computer whiz.”

Jupiter nodded. “No doubt. I bet he will also be later involved in the manipulation of the microchips of the new toys. The perfect man to for Miss Wyngard’s devious machinations.”

With an absent-minded look, Pete looked out the window. “If she wasn’t so incredibly corrupt, one could directly admire this master planner. The only question that remains is what these mysterious changes are all about.”

As there was no feedback from Mr Dungeon, Jupiter decided to call him. The audibly excited programmer apologized profusely for the wait. He pointed out that after a thorough analysis of the data, he had come to some incredible conclusions, which he was currently trying to substantiate with more systematic checks.

Using the hands-free setting, everyone listened spellbound to the spectacular explanations, which indeed made their hair stand on end. After heartfelt thanks for Mr Dungeon’s invaluable help, the First Investigator hung up and looked around aggressively.

“So now we know the true secret of Jessalyn Wyngard. It’s high time we put a spanner in the works of this criminal...”

After some final preparations, the group made its way to the nineteenth floor by lift, accompanied by a potpourri of upbeat Christmas tunes. In between, a few people got on and off, but fortunately there were no security guards among them. The large-scale manhunt operation was apparently really just getting underway on the lowest floor. So there would be enough time for the planned operation.

Once on the target floor, they marched directly to the conference room in question.

After a final breath, Mr Nostigon, still in full costume, knocked on the door and entered without waiting for an answer. The Three Investigators followed at his heels.

Miss Wyngard was standing before a group of about a dozen people at the head of a large conference table decorated with pine boughs and a string of coloured lights. She paused abruptly in her address and stared, as did her audience, at the arrivals.

“Ho-ho-ho! Here comes Santa Claus!” the security chief shouted in a booming voice.

“And he’s got a big Christmas surprise with him!” added Jupiter with a frown. He was all too aware that he looked anything but respectful in his purple socks and terry cloth bathrobe so he tried to make up for this deficit with all the more intense authoritarian charisma.

A visibly surprised Miss Wyngard quickly regained control of herself. Her frozen features gave way to a broad smile as she addressed the people seated before her with an apologetic gesture.

“You’ll have to forgive me—I had completely forgotten that there was also a briefing with our dear Santa Claus. Fortunately, we were basically through with everything important here, so I’d like you to take your positions for the gala now. I’ll join you shortly, okay?”

With a surprised murmur, those present rose and left the conference room with a sceptical look at the strange quartet. The Fun Fellows publicity manager, meanwhile, did not at all give the impression that she was thinking of escaping. Still smiling broadly, she remained at the head of the table and now began to clap her hands devoutly.

“My respects! The four Christmas musketeers actually managed to escape their pursuers.”

“And not only that,” Bob replied grimly, “we’ve got behind your dark secret too, my lady!”

“Is that so?” In feigned surprise, Miss Wyngard raised her eyebrows. “Well, that would be exciting!”

“Exciting for sure, don’t worry,” Mr Nostigon replied, taking off his scraggly ruffled beard with an energetic jerk. “We now know that you are the mastermind behind everything that has happened in the past few hours—starting with the attack on the journalist Desmond Calbourn.”

“Oh, yeah?” the brunette replied unapologetically. “And what reason should I have for that?”

“A very valid one,” Pete hissed. “You see, Mr Calbourn, in his researches into the new line of toys, was on the track of a huge scandal.”

Jupe nodded. “You, Miss Wyngard, have long been secretly pursuing a devious plan with the launch of *Heroes*, based on the ground-breaking concept of these entirely new toys.”

“As you know, the main feature of the *Heroes* action figures is that they can act almost completely independently,” Bob continued. “To that end, each figure uses its optical sensors to collect all the data necessary to orient itself in its respective environment.”

Mockingly, Miss Wyngard inclined her head. “Thank you very much for that exceedingly interesting technical digression, but as the publicity manager in charge, I am quite familiar

with those facts.”

“You are even aware of considerably more,” Mr Nostigon continued. “For example, in the originally intended mode, all recorded information is automatically erased from the toys’ memories after processing.”

“The emphasis is on ‘originally,’” added the Second Investigator, “because you intend to interfere with the future manufacturing process and make a small but significant change to the microchips.”

Jupiter took a step closer to the woman, who was still smiling stoically. “Our current understanding is that this is to be done with the assistance of the presumably bribed head of the engineering department of Fun Fellows—a certain Basil Gaffer, whose name appears several times in Mr Calbourn’s computer document. The result of this modification would be, as Pete already hinted at, most serious. All visual information of the *Heroes* action figures would now be sent wirelessly to a computer database where it would be stored and evaluated—without the knowledge of the buyers, of course.”

“An effect of almost monstrous proportions,” Mr Nostigon added with honest dismay. “For every house that has these toys, and all the actions of the occupants, would now suddenly be targets of spying by an unscrupulous advertising strategist.”

Angrily, Bob glowered at Miss Wyngard. “Access to that data would put you in a tremendous position of power. After all, few things in today’s consumer world are as valuable as detailed customer information.”

“So if the *Heroes of the Universe* make their expected triumphant march across the country, you would, at a stroke, possess data sovereignty over hundreds of thousands, later perhaps even millions of people,” Jupiter continued, “because without knowing it, every buyer would have one of these highly engineered toy snitches in his home guilelessly revealing his private life to you.”

With a dramatic gesture, the First Investigator pointed out the window. “An army of mini-spies flooding houses nationwide...”

Shaking his head, Pete, who had been skimming over a brochure lying open for the past few seconds, spoke up again. “Thanks to ‘exciting thematic focus’ of *Heroes*, the action figures would probably conquer just about every area of life.” He held up a brightly coloured double-page spread with a detailed overview. “For example, the advertisement brochure for Ice-Man, the Prince of the Snow, says that to develop his full powers, he should be placed in the refrigerator for some time. That would then cover the contents of the fridge.”

“... Which could also extend the spying radius to the kitchen and all the products there,” Mr Nostigon concluded angrily, while also reaching for one of the numerous brochures lying on the table.

“Very interesting indeed,” observed Bob. “The winged insect Dream-Man is supposed to watch over the children’s dreams from the bedside table. That would put the bedrooms under surveillance too!”

With a bitter nod, Jupiter lowered his brochure. “Not to mention Free-Man, the powerhouse leader of *Heroes*, and his blue fighting tiger, Armour Cat, who desperately need the freedom of the outdoors to unleash their energy.”

“So after all the rooms of the houses and apartments are covered, the spying radius would extend to gardens and parks,” Mr Nostigon concluded, looking at Miss Wyngard with a penetrating gaze. “As *Heroes* evolve into ubiquitous companions, the toys would automatically provide you with virtually round-the-clock information about the owners—their clothing, food, cosmetics, television preferences, toys, and so forth.”

Disdainfully, the Second Investigator tossed his brochure back on the table. "And even if you could only evaluate a fraction of the huge amount of data at first, the result would still be worth its weight in gold in the truest sense of the word."

"That's when you sell them—depending on the subject matter—to the highest bidder," Bob added disgustedly. "That alone is what you're after, no doubt—the very big money."

"Even certain intelligence circles could conceivably be highly interested buyers," Jupiter added. "A multimillion-dollar business with open borders..."

The security chief made a prompting gesture with his hand. "The only question that remains is whether this is all taking place under the auspices of the big boss, Lawrence Taggart."

After all this time of masking smiles, Miss Wyngard now for the first time showed a real emotional reaction, much more violent even than they had expected. From one second to the next, the blush of anger shot up her face and her hands clenched around the back of the chair she was standing behind.

"Taggart?" she hissed angrily. "You must have a fever! That ninny doesn't get what's going on in the real world anymore! And he wouldn't know real leadership if it jumped in his face with a neon sign!" Energetically, she pointed to herself. "It was thanks to me that the deal with *Heroes* went through in the first place back then—me alone! And does Taggart now thank me properly with gratuity and promotion?"

"Obviously the answer is 'no'..." Pete answered the rhetorical question.

"That's right! He never noticed my talent, let alone encouraged it—on the contrary. Meanwhile it is no open secret that Taggart's son-in-law is itching to take over my post. Imagine that—in return for my brilliant work, that idiot wants to dump me!"

"And to repay him for this injustice, you want to carry out one of the biggest coups in the history of Fun Fellows to ascend to the position of powerful information queen, who need not depend on anything or anyone," Jupiter concluded.

"After that, there would certainly be no question of dismissal," Bob surmised. "After all, you could ice-coldly blackmail Mr Taggart into launching a huge scandal over the illegal technology in the *Heroes* action figures. With your skill at manipulating evidence, I'm sure it would be easy for you to make the whole thing look like Taggart's doing."

Mr Nostigon exhaled deeply. "You could rise to be the new star of Fun Fellows, and at the same time become filthy rich with your immense information power."

"And to accomplish that, any means will do," Pete added angrily, "even an attempt on the life of Mr Calbourn, who has recently come to your notice."

"Ruthless and calculating," the First Investigator confirmed. "Your problem was that you didn't catch wind of Calbourn's investigation until recently. So you felt compelled to stop the impending threat right here at GameFame."

Nodding, Bob folded his arms. "So you arranged an almost perfectly constructed crime, starting with reserving Room D-609 for Mr Calbourn, who you then lured here prematurely on some pretext."

"And right into the trap," the security chief added. "Maybe you even offered him a bribe first to keep him quiet... or did you set your henchmen on him right away? The fact is, he was given some kind of toxin that caused him to collapse."

"The subsequent preparation of the crime scene and the perpetrators' disappearance without a trace via the secret trap door to the room downstairs was supposed to make it look like a heart attack," Pete noted. "Luckily, a cleaner intervened, leaving some traces in the room."

“Traces which Mr Nostigon, who was called in, and we discovered,” added Jupiter, “and then exactly what was not intended in your great master plan happened—doubts arose as to the apparent course of the whole incident, and we began enquiries. You were unquestionably informed of this instantly by your accomplices, who were probably eavesdropping on us all the time under the trap door. Of course, you could on no account allow us to come across any explosive finds in the course of our investigation, especially since you had since determined that Calbourn’s evidence was not in Room D-609 or in his hotel room.”

Bob pointed at Mr Nostigon. “So you changed your plans in a flash and started the hunt for the security chief. You screened him from top to bottom and then, with the help of the technical genius Basil Gaffer, you had the computer and telephone call records manipulated, including the leave records of the cleaner Mr Barnes. From then on, Gaffer took over all communications with Mr Nostigon and tried to lure him out. His astonishingly well-faked video evidence supposedly unmasked the security chief unequivocally as the perpetrator. As Mr Nostigon’s credibility was ruined, and with no confidants here on the ground to turn to, his only option was to flee.”

“... But was hounded by your personal manhunt team,” the First Investigator added, “not to mention your cunning action with the tracking devices you gave Bob and me. After all, since the eavesdropping under Calbourn’s office room, you also learned that we ‘outsiders’ were working with Mr Nostigon... so you hoped that we would eventually lead you to him.”

“... Which you now have done, quite willingly and without a transmitter.” A broad grin spread across the publicity manager’s face. “Well, after all the fuss, you can imagine how pleased I am that we’ve come full circle in the end after all.” With coldly twinkling eyes, she glanced at the laptop Jupiter was carrying under his arm. “I assume that contains what I’ve been looking for all this time?”

“Call it what you like,” Mr Nostigon remarked. “This evidence is your downfall. All your plans for wealth and a great career can now be safely buried—for nothing will come of it.”

“And this time neither Skulldor nor that weird old woman with the syringe will help you!” hissed Pete triumphantly.

A spark of sincere irritation flitted across Miss Wyngard’s face. “Skulldor? I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you on that one. Neither he nor anyone else involved with *Heroes* has anything to do with this. Do you seriously think I would work with an uncontrollable bunch of neurotic actors?”

Now it was Mr Nostigon and The Three Investigators who paused in surprise and uncertainty, which the publicity manager clearly enjoyed. With an even wider grin, she now left her position and took a few steps towards the quartet.

“On the other hand, you’re quite right about the ‘weird old woman’, although of course I disapprove of that description for my eminently capable special assistant, Miss White. Granted, she does have a certain penchant for the dramatic, but the job is supposed to be fun after all.” With an inviting gesture, she pointed to the back of the conference room. “Isn’t that right, Miss White?”

Taken completely by surprise, the four of them whirled around, but at first they couldn’t see anyone. Then, from the dark shadows of a large filing cabinet in the far corner of the room, a scrawny figure emerged.

“The Ivory Woman...” gasped Pete in horror.

1 Hour Left

24th December, 11 am.

Like the others, the Second Investigator had immediately registered that this time, the pale woman was holding not a syringe but an old-fashioned snub-nosed revolver.

“So what are you going to do now?” asked Jupiter, turning to Miss Wyngard. “Are you going to have us all shot?”

“Not at all,” placated the Fun Fellows manager. “We’re not barbarians after all. Miss White is going to look after you for a while now, so you won’t do anything silly. Meanwhile, I’m going to oversee the big gala and give *Heroes* a grand start. After that, we’ll sit down and discuss what to do next.

“With the right financial incentive, a compromise acceptable to all sides will be found. The same goes for Mr Calbourn... once he’s recovered. After this shot across the bow, he will certainly be much more open to an amicable solution.”

“Ice-cold snake...” hissed Bob softly.

Courageously, Mr Nostigon took a step forward. “And what if we don’t take your bribe?”

With the corners of her mouth twisted in rebuke, Miss Wyngard shook her head. “We’d rather not even think of such an unpleasant possibility, otherwise we’d be forced to ruin your lives. Believe me, Mr Gaffer has the means of connecting your lives, by airtight evidence, with offences which you cannot even imagine. No judge in the world would believe any muddled conspiracy theories about mini-spies in children’s bedrooms.”

“Indeed, a plan worthy of a master criminal,” Jupiter noted appreciatively, while at the same time, a smile curled his lips. “Makes one almost sorry to let such a brilliant scheme collapse.”

“Oh?” retorted the publicity manager with a sneer. “And how is that going to succeed, if I may ask politely?”

“Actually, it has already succeeded,” Bob announced confidently, “and it is thanks to one of the typical weaknesses of criminal geniuses—over-confidence.”

Pete nodded. “Did you really think we were going to march in here without any security precautions to happily chat with you about your misdeeds and then get ourselves captured?”

Now Miss Wyngard’s ice shell was beginning to crack. “What... do you mean?”

“Allow me...” Jupe replied in a friendly manner and demonstratively slowly, so as not to provoke the Ivory Woman into a short-circuit reaction, reached into the pocket of his bathrobe. Out came his mobile phone, which he now held aloft like a trophy. “If I may make a brief introduction—on the other end is the stand-in security chief, Charlton Hogart... and I’m sure he has been listening with great interest during the past few minutes.”

Smiling broadly, Mr Nostigon pointed to the right outer pocket of Santa’s coat, from which his mobile phone had been protruding all this time. “On my line is your boss, Mr Lawrence Taggart, who now looks set to revamp his publicity department in a very timely manner.”

“In my pocket, the fair management is listening in,” Pete added cheerfully.

Bob was the last to tap his jeans pocket, which contained Mr Nostigon’s personal mobile phone. “And I took the liberty of having my dad, Bill Andrews, at the *Los Angeles Times*,

record the entire conversation.”

“Well, did I promise too much?” enquired Jupiter with feigned politeness. “As perfect as your plan seemed—even you can’t manipulate away such an exclusive ensemble of witnesses.”

All at once, all body tension seemed to escape from the publicity manager’s limbs. She stared dumbly from one to the other in disbelief. Her knees began to tremble and she had to support herself on the table top with her left hand to keep from buckling.

The Ivory Woman, however, did not even think of giving up. She took advantage of the group’s momentary attention on Miss Wyngard to grab Jupiter, who was closest to her, by the scruff of the neck and threateningly point the gun at him.

“If you think I’m going to be arrested that easily, I’m going to have to disappoint you,” she hissed in an unpleasantly high-pitched voice. “I’m going to retreat with this fat kid now—and no one is going to stop me, understand?”

Helplessly, Mr Nostigon, Bob and Pete watched the frozen First Investigator being dragged to the door by the pale woman, but just as the scrawny fingers of her left hand clasped the handle, the door was flung open so violently that the abductor and Jupiter tumbled to the floor from the tremendous impact.

In the doorway, however, stood not Mr Hogart with his strike team, as Nostigon and the boys had thought, but a visibly bewildered, muscular hunk in a loincloth.

“Free-Man?” Pete and Bob exclaimed simultaneously, while Mr Nostigon was already kneeling over the Ivory Woman, disarming her with a practised grip.

“What... is going on here?” asked the puzzled heroic actor, looking around the conference room.

Relieved, Mr Nostigon looked up at him. “Quite simply, thanks to your valiant efforts, a most dangerous pistol-packing mama has been rendered harmless.”

“Oh, really?” Momentarily, the blond warrior sensed a chance for some publicity-worthy self-dramatization. “After all, my motto is: ‘Where evil forces rise, there can be only one saviour’... not to mention that a true hero always has a sixth sense for emergencies.”

“Sixth sense, my foot!” now hissed the visibly annoyed Beastor, who just came in from behind. “You just barged into the room and happened to catch that granny with the door somehow!”

With a lecturing gesture, Free-Man raised his right index finger. “Not somehow, but at exactly the right moment—and that’s what you call a heroic deed.” Theatrically, he posed and tensed his massive biceps. “Free-Man, the strongest man in the universe!”

“I call it a dumb coincidence!” now screeched the little wizard Quorko, who had just pushed his way to the front among the other *Heroes* performers who had arrived. “But of course our ‘superhero with a sixth sense’ is going to make a huge circus out of it now and bug us about it for weeks to come!”

“Honour to whom honour is due,” the giant replied, unimpressed. Then he looked around promptly and pointed at the door. “Would someone please take a picture of Free-Man and the Gate of Vengeance?”

“Oh man...” groaned Beastor, shaking his head. “Now he’s got a title for the act too.”

“Hey! Can we just get on with what we are here for?” the annoyed voice of Skulldor sounded from the background, now advancing to the doorstep. “What is it now? Do we get the final instructions for the gala here or not?”

“I’m sorry, but the meeting has to be cancelled at short notice...” Jupiter explained, groaning in the meantime as he picked himself up and felt his aching elbow. Then an

encouraging smile flitted across his face. “However, I’m sure the legendary *Heroes of the Universe* won’t be fazed by this minor change and will still put on a terrific show.”

Finally, Mr Hogart appeared and, followed by his men, energetically made his way through the rows of exotic monsters and warriors. Breathing heavily, he paused after entering the conference room, relieved to find that there was no more danger.

“Sorry for the delay,” he puffed. “Due to some system failure, all the lifts went down earlier. Obviously a last-ditch effort by that Mr Gaffer to use the chaos to make his escape. Didn’t do that rascal any good, though—my men caught him a few minutes ago. But of course, on foot, it took us a lot longer to reach the bloody nineteenth floor.” Annoyed, he held up his mobile phone. “I only understood a fraction of your glorious conference, by the way—the sound quality was simply appalling.”

“I hope that’s not the case with our other listeners,” Jupiter replied with a grin. “Anyway, we will fill you in and answer any questions.”

“I certainly hope so.” Annoyed, Hogart wiped his sweaty brow. “Man, that must have been at least a billion steps. Makes me want to throw my feet away and bolt on new ones.”

With an exhausted smile Pete looked at him. “You wouldn’t believe how well we can relate to that, sir...”

While the security team apprehended Miss Wyngard and the Ivory Woman before the eyes of the astonished space heroes, The Three Investigators, after finishing their respective telephone calls, took a few steps aside with Mr Nostigon. In the meantime, they had received from Mr Hogart the gratifying news that Desmond Calbourn was conscious again and on the road to recovery.

“What do you think?” asked Pete, looking at the costumed performers. “Will the big launch of the *Heroes* action figures be damaged by this?”

“I hope not,” Jupiter replied. “Neither Fun Fellows nor Dwight Fillmore nor the actors can do anything about the machinations of that lady criminal. And now that she and Gaffer are out of action, the spy-rigging of the toys will never happen.”

Bob nodded. “As I understand from my father, no technical details are to be released to the public, and Doe Dungeon will keep tight-lipped too.”

“Thus, the heroes and monsters now have it entirely in their hands and claws, respectively, as to whether a successful future lies ahead of them,” Nostigon concluded with a smile.

Together they all started the way back. Fortunately, the lifts were working again by now. The three boys shared a lift with Mr Nostigon, Free-Man, Beastor, Quorko and Skulldor.

A little embarrassed, Bob turned to the man in the skeleton mask. “Uh... forgive me for asking, but I overheard a little argument last night. It was about some action of yours that was criticized by your colleagues. Now I’m thinking all the time—”

“Fabulous, even the fans are talking about it now!” Beastor snapped, “and this darn magazine just came out today!”

“Magazine?” asked Jupiter, confused. His friends and the security chief were also completely perplexed.

Annoyed, Free-Man gave a loud sigh. “Well, it doesn’t matter now—you’ll find out anyway. My cute colleague here...” he said as he pointed at Skulldor with a scowl, “has had a crack in his ego for ages, because he played one of the most famous villains in television history, but no one knows his face.”

“Now I understand...” Bob muttered. “So Skulldor meant that someone like Free-Man doesn’t have that problem because, after all, he doesn’t wear a mask—and neither does Reela.”

“Quorko, Beastor, and most of the other *Heroes*, on the other hand, do,” Jupiter added, now realizing as well.

The little wizard nodded until his floppy hat almost slipped off his head. “So now, in the wake of the reboot, our illustrious Dark Lord of the Underworld has had the glorious idea of running a fat story in a Hollywood glossy!”

“So... what’s the problem?” enquired Nostigon.

Incensed, Free-Man gestured around with his mighty hands. “What’s the problem? That’s what I’m trying to tell you! That jackass also gave them several photos from our wild shooting days back then!”

“Among other things was a couple of snapshots from a wet and happy pool party!” added Beastor angrily.

“Now it’s starting all over again...” groaned Skulldor, annoyed. “All this fuss over a few photos is completely over the top.”

“Over the top?” yelled Free-Man angrily. “I don’t even have pants on in most of the photos!”

At that moment, fortunately, the lift had arrived at the ground floor, allowing Mr Nostigon and The Three Investigators to break away from the brawlers.

As they strode through the festively decorated lobby, Jupiter suddenly paused and gestured to the reception desk with a grin. “Even though Free Man is a great advocate of nudism, I’m going to find out where my clothes ended up after the shaft slide. In the long run, the current outfit is just a tad too airy for me...”

Fortunately, locating Jupiter’s clothes turned out to be much less complicated than feared and so the First Investigator returned to his friends a little later fully dressed.

In mock seriousness, Bob appraised him. “True... from an investigator’s point of view, this old outfit is definitely preferable to the half-naked version.”

“Absolutely,” Pete agreed with him. “Speaking of naked—would you have guessed that even the most powerful warriors in the universe have to deal with issues like embarrassing photos?”

“Don’t forget who cooked this whole thing up,” Bob objected with a grin. “Skulldor, the Dark Lord of the Underworld.”

The security chief also smiled. “Well, it is and remains an eternal battle between good and evil.”

“Probably true,” Jupiter agreed with him as they stepped outside into the courtyard, which was covered in deep snow and glistening picturesquely in the sunlight, to the musical accompaniment of *Walking in a Winter Wonderland*.

“There is one thing, however, that makes me very hopeful,” Jupiter said.

Pete raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Which is?”

Beaming, the First Investigator pointed to Mr Nostigon, who still wore his red coat and now paused curiously beside the magnificently decorated Christmas tree.

“When Santa Claus himself joins forces with The Three Investigators and the universe’s greatest heroes to defeat an evil winter witch, it’s sure to be a terrific Christmas!”

*MERRY CHRISTMAS
AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!*